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# Self-Awareness of Food Choice and Body Image: A Relational Study in the Undergraduate Female Population

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Self-Awareness of Food Choice and Body Image:  
A Relational Study in the Undergraduate Female Population

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A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Social Work.

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### Abstract

The present study has measured, by self-report, factors that affect food choice in the college-aged female population and the relationship between these factors and perceived body image. A review of the literature reveals that health, appearance, cost, time and availability all serve as influential factors in this population's food choices, but the literature does not investigate the relationship between comparing the variables of food choice and body image. This correlational study employed a survey research design with Likert-scaled questions to gain insight regarding food choice in seventy-five undergraduate students. The main findings suggest that the target population based food consumption primarily on its consideration of physical appearance and that the four food choice factors, appearance, cost, time/availability and health, were negatively correlated with body image. Implications are considered, primarily concerning the generalizability of this study and suggestions for further research in this field of study.

## Self-Awareness of Food Choice and Body Image:

### A Relational Study in the Undergraduate Female Population

It is estimated that as many as 10 million females and one million males are currently struggling with some form of an eating disorder in the United States. It is also believed that millions of Americans also struggle with overeating and binge eating disorder (Hoek & van Hocken, 2003, p. 383). These statistics do not include the millions of Americans who hide their disorders and who binge, purge, and restrict food in secrecy. With alarming incidences such as these, eating and reasoning about food choice are increasingly important areas of study. To add to the urgency in this field of research, the prevalence of eating disorders is most common in females 15-24. Anorexia has the highest premature fatality rate (Hoek & van Hocken, 2003, p. 384). In a world where “thin is in” and in which the media portrays emaciation as beauty, young woman tend to be first to fall to disordered eating and negative body image. This prevalence makes a study of the female college population a necessity.

Literature has been cited to discuss the prevalence of eating disorders; however the scope literature is not limited to this facet of eating behavior. Literature is also abundant in the field of college-aged adults and their eating habits and body image. The scope of literature for eating disorders and body image in college-aged woman is extensive. Literature regarding factors that affect food choice and dietary decisions is abundant. However, there is little that relates eating choices and body image. This study examines self-awareness of factored food choice and its correlation to self-report of body satisfaction in college-aged women. In completing this study, information regarding food choice in the college-aged population will add to the existing literature by exploring the relation between these two variables. After conducting the literature

review, the researcher developed an instrument to survey seventy-five college-aged women and analyzed the data accordingly to better explore the relationship of these two variables.

### **Literature Review**

The researcher conducted the literature review in three processes. The researcher primarily investigated literature regarding factors in food choice, models of food choice behavior, and factorial analysis of eating habits. Subsequently, the researcher narrowed the exploration, specifically gathering information regarding food choice factors as influences in the target population. Finally, the researcher compiled information regarding body satisfaction and perceived body image in college-aged women.

Although literature is abundant in all three fields, there is little research conducted on the interaction between these variables. The present relational study seeks to gather more information regarding the correlations between conscious food choices, body satisfaction, and body image, in the chosen population.

### **Food Choice**

Food choice decisions are proven to be purposeful experiences that occur multiple times a day. Studies have investigated the factors involved in food choice. Chambers, Lobb, Butler, and Trail (2008) studied “the influence of age and gender on food choice,” employing focus groups stratified by the two aforementioned traits. This study emphasized group interaction and established six focus groups (n=43) to examine factors determining food choice (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 358). Participants completed an anonymous survey prior to engaging in focus groups regarding the variables “perceived body image” and “self-report of health” (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 434). After completion of this survey, the focus groups engaged in a moderated discussion about questions pertaining to typical food purchase and consumption (Chambers et

al., 2008). The researchers compiled data regarding specific food group choice (fruit and vegetables vs. meats and carbohydrates). Consistent with the goal of the study at hand, participants were invited to explain the reasoning for their food choice. Chambers et al. (2008) compiled data and segmented these responses into four main categories: cost, time, health, and appearance

Results concluded that all four factors elicited a variety of responses across gender and age. Discussion by the researchers offered insight into differences among variables that make factors in food choice a valuable topic of study. The present study seeks to utilize these four factors presented in the self-report of food choice (Chambers et al., 2008). Demonstrated by the use of focus groups and discussion, the factors of food choice can be operationalized in four overall contexts: cost, time/availability, health, and physical appearance. In doing so, the study at hand seeks to expand upon knowledge regarding factored dietary decisions and the target population.

The science of food choice decisions has been defined through small focus groups and also through the use of developed food choice process models. Sobal & Bisognal (2009) constructed a food choice model employing a social definition perspective, which “assumes individuals actively conceptualize and interactively interpret options in the process of deciding and reconsidering choices” (Sobal & Bisognal, 2009, p. S39). The theoretical framework behind the model, developed by the Cornell Food Choice Research Group, demonstrates that while individuals make food decisions often and routinely, these choices nevertheless exist purposefully and deliberately in the human environment.

Sobal and Bisognal (2009) sought to create a model that would broaden the current literature’s range of factors that effect food choice. The food model encompassed life experience

(operationalized as life course), external influences on dietary decision (influence), and personal value sets for food strategy (personal food systems) into a model to understand food behavior better (p. S38). The food choice models demonstrates how the three identified dimensions of food choice impact personal identity, and are in turn, influenced by identity. The model demonstrates how “value” plays an influential role in dietary decisions. “Value negotiations” in the model demonstrate that individuals make factored food choices by elements that are personally most important (Sobal & Bisognal, 2009, p. S43). For the present study, this may mean college-aged women place a higher value on appearance and health, and thus subjects’ value negotiations about food reflect this choice. Overall, the model demonstrates the dynamic properties of food choice and the inclusion of a greater number of variables as contributions to dietary decisions.

A cross-sectional study conducted by Hackett et al. (2008) analyzed the factor of availability in food choice further. The researchers were interested in “the role of the physical environment in food choice” and demonstrated that access to food is a prerequisite for healthy eating (Hackett et al., 2008, p. 430). The researchers hypothesized that in areas of lower economic status and less physical appeal, children would have poorer dietary frameworks. Mapping food choice in the local environment affirmed this research hypothesis. One thousand five hundred and thirty-five adolescent children were distributed dietary choice surveys. Adolescent dietary habits were categorized into “four groups according to whether their positive markers [encouraged food choice] and negative marker [discouraged food choice] were above or below the median scores” (Hackett et al., 2008, p. 432). Dietary responses were plotted along a geographic distribution of the community and analyzed accordingly.

Observational analysis of the plotted maps verified that less desirable eating habits existed in lower socio-economical neighborhoods. On the contrary, children with desired eating habits were represented on the map in areas of higher economic status. Researchers concluded that “the structure of the built environment interacts with social-cultural norms and habits to influence food choice” and subsequently that “food habits may be local phenomena” (Hackett et al., 2008, p. 435). This information is extremely useful to the present study. The researcher understands “availability” as being a factor in food choice. However, the researcher has found that availability consists of sub-factors such as local and physical environment.

The physical environment is an important variable to consider when creating a working hypothesis about college campuses. With external influence, availability of dining hall food options, and peer interaction being constant and influential, the study at hand will take the physical environment into account, including questionnaire items to better understand this variable. Through qualitative analysis, Hackett et al. (2008) concluded, “access has various components, including price, desirability and peer-pressure/prevaling social norms” (Hackett et al., 2008, p. 435). These conclusions mirror the present study and validate the researcher’s choice in including cost, time/availability, health, and appearance as the variables of study.

Literature regarding gendered food choice has been vital in the researcher’s understanding of typical eating habits for college-aged women. Eating behaviors in young adults are thought to be multi-faceted, in which many influences play a role in determining their food choice. However, some factors have greater influences on eating behavior than others. Appearance and health are of specific interest in the present study. Chambers et al. (2008) conducted focus groups in the age range 18-30 and studied the factored variables across both age and gender. “Overall positive attitudes towards healthy eating were vocalized across gender and



age groups,” however participants aged 18-30 were less likely to respond with positivism (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 360). The discussion and corresponding questionnaire concluded that although all participants reported a perceived level of healthy eating, “there was a higher tendency to self-report having an unhealthy diet in the youngest age group” (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 361). However, the target focus group self-reported to have an overall healthy diet.

### **Food Choice in the Female Subset**

Specifically, Chambers et al. determined that appearance was a factor for the female subset only. Data was collected that revealed that the 18-30-year-old participants cited appearance and body image as influences on their dietary choices. Justifications for healthy responses included “taking care of their skin,” “having attractive hair,” and “controlling their weight” (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 361). Results concluded that appearance was the greatest of influence in the target age group. “Women aged 18-30 talked about image and how their attempt to fit into an ideal affected the way they thought about food” (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 361). Influence of appearance was discussed decreasingly with age, with women over 60 displaying no concern with appearance as a factor in dietary decision-making. Appearance being of most concern for the target age group only is a useful discovery for the study at hand. Appearance is referenced mostly in women of college age, and thus, the researcher can hypothesize that this variable will be of great importance to the present sample as well.

**Appearance.** Chambers et al. (2008) concluded that appearance had the greatest impact on the target female age group. The researchers confirmed that while the above statement was evident in the qualitative research, some participants “did not wish to discuss whether their appearance had an affect on the food choices they made” (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 363). The

researchers present this as a limitation to the study and invite researchers to collect more data regarding this topic.

**Cost.** Cost was an issue for the target age group. Participants in the age range 18-30 “said that they found cost a barrier to healthy eating, whereas other groups were less inclined to report this” (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 361). Responses demonstrated that while healthy eating may be a concern for those females worried about appearance, cost of food remained a determinant as well. One participant revealed that spending money “going out” took precedent over spending money on healthy food (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 360). This suggests that while college women may want to eat healthily, there are other expenditures that are of more personal value than healthy food. The target group was more inclined to eating prepared food, but was “unsure” of the differences in cost between home-cooked vs. ready-made meals. Other college-aged practices, such as “going out,” are deemed more important, and thus the present study will look for similar response regarding cost.

**Time/Availability.** Time/availability, as a variable of great influence in the intended population of study, was the “major reason for not eating a healthy diet” in participants aged 18-30 (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 361). In the target female age group, “being away from home for most of the day” evoked unhealthy dietary decisions. “Participants under 30 said that they lacked resources to buy certain products and make healthier meals” (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 360). As previously stated, the present study will gather data concerning the lack of time/availability with great interest. The unique lifestyle of a residential college student alters typical relationships with time and availability of food. As discussed, the physical environment and allocation of food through dining services creates distinctive food habits in the college population. Thus, the variable of time/availability is shown to be of importance.

**Health.** Health is a topic of importance to young adults. Studies have shown that for young girls, “dieting and healthy eating may be perceived to be similar” (Story, Neumark-Sztainer, Sherwood, Stang, & Murray, 1998, p. 1134). A separate study additionally determined that young girls (age 15-18) viewed “dieting” as being “good for their health” (Roberts, McGuinness, Bilton, & Maxwell, 1999, p. 64). “Dieting” in young girls has been operationalized as “eating healthy food and cutting out unhealthy food, reflected in the increased consumption of fruit and vegetables reported by dieting adolescents” (Roberts, McGuinness, Bagnall & Bilton, 2001, p. 104) and used accordingly in the above studies. The findings from the three studies suggest that health, as a factor in young adult food choice, is perceived to be associated with dieting and restricting consumption of other foods in favor of healthy alternatives, such as fruits and vegetables.

In the study conducted by Chamber et al. (2008), women 18-30 demonstrated an overall awareness of “health” and “the benefits to a better diet” (p. 364). The age group in question, although aware of disease or medical complications, was not inclined to alter their diet for these reasons (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 354). Health was a factor stressed by older age groups, who were or had been fearful of specific health problems. The results regarding health show that while the intended population of study may be aware of the benefits of eating a healthy diet, spending money on such health benefits is not emphasized.

Stress and other physical and mental strains will be encompassed under the factor labeled “health” in college-aged women. The results of a study by Austin, Smith, and Patterson (2009) generated information regarding stress and young adults, in which only the female subset cited a relationship between stress and diet quality (Austin et al., 2009). Forty-one adolescents (aged 15-18) completed a questionnaire with measures of stress, daily hassles, and dietary quality. Focus

groups were also used. Females demonstrated a higher measure of “dietary restraint” than adolescent males. For the present study, the findings demonstrate the importance of health as a factor in food choice in college-aged women specifically. Findings by Austin et al. (2009) demonstrate how food choice can modify when health is compromised or, comparatively, promoted.

### **Body Image in Food Choice**

The four variables of appearance, cost, time/availability, and health will be compared to subjects’ perceived body image and satisfaction. There previously exists minimal literature regarding food choice and perceived body image and satisfaction in college women. However, literature is abundant about the population regarding the variables of body image and satisfaction. Research has been completed in the target population regarding body image and feelings of depression and discontent.

**Body image and depression.** Denniston, Roth, and Gilroy (1991) investigated the relationship between perceived body image and depression, operationally defined as “dysphoria” in one hundred thirty two undergraduate women in an East Coast undergraduate institution. Results concluded that a significant relationship existed between dysphoria and evaluation of appearance through a perceived body image scale and depression inventory measure. These significant findings demonstrate that most college-aged women report discontent and depression concerning personal appearance as measured through the use of a body image scale. These feelings of dysphoria were also significantly negatively correlated to an eating attitudes test (EAT). As body dysphoria increased, feelings towards eating attitudes decreased. Previous research has demonstrated an overwhelming response of discontent with body image in the target

population. A body image scale was utilized in the present study, in order to determine whether these findings are similar in the present population.

While the literature is limited in exploring the relation between the four food choice factors and body image, the researcher can assume through the above findings that those who respond negatively towards their eating behaviors will demonstrate greater body dissatisfaction. The four food choice factors described above (physical appearance, cost, time/availability, and health) have been identified in the surveyed literature as being variables of greatest consideration in food choice decisions. These four factors served as subscales to understand food choice and body image and satisfaction in the target population.

### **Method**

This study intended to sample female college residents and gain knowledge regarding female food choice. The study attempted to measure, in a non-intrusive way, how the college-aged female population chooses nourishment. This study employed a survey research design to gain necessary information regarding self-report of the factors that influence food choice. These findings were compared to subjects' perceived body image. It served as a significant tool to understanding how this impressionable population eats, and the factors in which decide overall food choice in relation to feelings towards individual body image. The researcher believed that all four factors identified in the literature above (physical appearance, cost, time/availability, and health) will contribute to the food choice decisions made by the sample. The researcher hypothesized, through personal experience and review of literature, that physical appearance would be of critical importance in food choice due to the literature surveyed and the prevalence of disordered eating and body image dissatisfaction in the target population. The researcher estimated that as consideration of the variables "physical appearance" and "health" increased,

overall satisfaction of body image would also increase. Concurrently, the researcher also hypothesized that as the importance of cost and time/availability increases, overall satisfaction of body image would decrease.

### **Participants**

The sample consisted of 75 female college students, age 18-24, enrolled in an undergraduate institution in Providence, Rhode Island. Providence is home to five local universities (Providence College, Rhode Island College, Rhode Island School of Design, Johnson and Wales, and Brown University) and thus provides a large population of 18-24 year old females for study. Students in this area come from diverse home states, cultures, and socioeconomic statuses. The local college population provided major insight regarding individual food choice and the factors in which determine eating habits. Participants were informed of the purpose of this study and were not compensated in any way for their participation. Participants were aware that they could stop the study at any time and were given contact information to obtain more information regarding the results if desired.

### **Materials**

This relational study adopted a survey research design. A questionnaire was distributed to the sample found in a Providence higher-learning institution (Appendix A). This self-report contained questions concerning food choice based on four factors: cost, health, time/availability, and appearance. Each factor was represented in four individual questions on the 16-item self-questionnaire. Items 1, 7, 12 and 16 represent the factor of cost. Items 2, 8, 9, and 15 portray food choice as a representation of health. Items 4, 6, 11, and 13 demonstrate time and availability as factors for food choice among the typical college constructs of busily consuming food and eating in dining halls. Items 3, 5, 10, and 14 represent the influence of appearance on food

choice, questioning the subject's desire to be or remain thin, diet, and restrict intake based on physical appearance. An example of an item would include a statement, such as "I eat diet food that I believe will make me thin," to represent physical appearance as an aspect of food choice. The participants also completed a five-item body image scale to demonstrate individual level of perceived body image and satisfaction (items 17-21). Subjects responded on an eleven-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from "always" (1) to "never" (11) and in the body image scale, from "extremely agree" (1) to "extremely disagree" (11).

The survey has no mention of eating disorders, disordered body image or eating habits, or negative self-esteem, protecting this study from the effects of social desirability.

## **Procedures**

The questionnaires were distributed to the sample and completed anonymously. All were given the appropriate amount of time to complete and hand in the survey. Analysis was conducted to determine how the sample chooses their food, and correlations were determined between the four factored variables and perceived body image/satisfaction. Statistical analysis was completed through the use of SPSS. Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the contribution of each of the four factors to total variance in food choice. Pearson's product-moment linear correlation was employed to test association between each factor and body image satisfaction.

The sixteen-item food choice scale was divided appropriately into four subscales consisting of items regarding cost, health, time/availability, and appearance. New subscales representing composite scores were computed for each factor, labeled Total Cost, Total Health, Total Time/Availability, and Total Appearance. To determine the internal reliability of each new variable, Cronbach's Alpha testing was run on each composite factor score. Item-total statistics

were used to determine whether particular survey items should be discarded. The Cronbach's Alpha scores for each item satisfied the reliability of three variables at a score at the .6 level or above. For the factor labeled Time/Availability, item 3 was eliminated from the composite score, raising the reliability of "Total Time/Availability" from .514 to .689. "Total Score" was then computed as a new scale representing all sixteen items regarding the overall variable of food choice in the sample.

### **Findings**

Regression analysis was conducted to determine the contribution of each factor to the subject overall variance in the total score (Appendix B). Correlations for each composite factor score were also correlated to each subject's total body image score using Pearson's r correlation. All four composite factors yielded significant positive correlations between the composite factor and its influence on overall food choice (Appendix B). The researcher believed that all four factors identified in the literature above (physical appearance, cost, time/availability, and health) contributed to the food choice decisions made by the sample. The researcher hypothesized, through personal experience and review of literature, that physical appearance would be of critical importance in food choice due to the literature surveyed and the prevalence of disordered eating and body image dissatisfaction in the target population. The results confirmed the researcher's primary hypothesis.

The researcher also estimated that as consideration of the variables "physical appearance" and "health" increased, overall satisfaction of body image would also increase. This hypothesis remained unfounded. Concurrently, the researcher also hypothesized that as the importance of cost and time/availability increases, overall satisfaction of body image would decrease. These results confirmed this hypothesis, and demonstrated that as the importance of all four factors



increased, overall satisfaction of body image decreased. The results are reported below by each composite factor. Composite factor variables were also statistically analyzed with the variable of overall body image, labeled “Total Body Image” (Appendix C).

Regression analysis revealed that the subscale, “Total Appearance” and overall food choice predicted 61.1% of variation in overall food choice. The result supports both the researcher’s intuition and literature review in evidencing that appearance had the greatest impact on the target female age group (Chambers et al. 2008). The evidence suggests that undergraduate women represented in this sample are most concerned with their appearance in their food choices. Thus, the sample makes food choices primarily according to the notion of how such decision will affect physical appearance. This tendency to consider physical appearance as the main contributor to food choice decisions confirms the research hypothesis that physical appearance would be of critical importance in food choice.

The correlation between the subscale “Total Appearance” and the composite score labeled “Total Body Image” did not support the research hypothesis of a positive correlation. The relationship showed a significantly negative correlation ( $r=-.304$ ,  $p=.01$ , one-tailed). As body satisfaction decreases, attentiveness to appearance as a basis for food choice increases. This demonstrates to the researcher that while appearance remains the most important factor for food choice decisions, this attentiveness is not associated with. The attentiveness to physical appearance could, in fact, diminish body satisfaction, as undergraduate women make food choices to seek a certain body ideal. Undergraduate women may be making food choices primarily for weight loss or weight maintenance, and nevertheless feel dissatisfied with their personal appearance despite their attentiveness.

Regression analysis revealed that the subscale of cost predicts 20.2% of variance in the overall food choice score. For this sample, cost serves as the second most important factor in determining what food is consumed. These findings corresponds with the hypotheses and also with the evidence provided in the literature analysis, which states that cost was determined to be of particular importance in the college-aged female population. Specifically, this relationship corresponds with the notion of cost being a barrier towards food choice in the chosen demographic, and thus is taken into consideration of when conducting food choice decisions (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 361).

Pearson's  $r$  correlation was also conducted to compare the composite factor score, "Total Cost" with "Total Body Image". The researcher hypothesized that cost would be negatively correlated to body image. This hypothesis was accurate in that this relationship yields a significant negative correlation ( $r=-.286$ ,  $p=.05$ , one-tailed). For this sample, as the attentiveness of food cost in food choice increases, their individual satisfaction with body image decreases. This finding was comparable to the literature which demonstrates that while healthy eating may be a concern for females concerned with their body image, cost of food served as the primarily determinant for food choice (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 361). Respondents may have felt that while they wished to make ulterior food choices, they could not afford to. This inability may contribute to utilizing "fast-paced" and, stereotypically, unhealthy food options, and this feelings of dissatisfaction with physical appearance.

Regression analysis revealed that the subscale of time/availability predicts 9.8% of variance in the overall food choice score. This result does not confirm the research hypothesis that time/availability would serve as a major contributor to food choice in the target sample. It contradicts the surveyed literature, which suggested that food choice could be representative of

the environment as the structure and social-cultural norms of the community alter behavior (Hackett et al., 2008, p. 435). The undergraduate female population may consider time/availability due to the campus structure (dining halls, social eating environments, and fast-paced food options), however they do not report letting this variable influence their food choice decisions as forcefully as the aforementioned factors of physical appearance or cost.

Pearson's  $r$  correlation was then utilized to compare the composite factor score, "Total Time/Availability" with "Total Body Image". The researcher hypothesized that the factor labeled time and availability would be negatively correlated to body image, due to the necessity for convenience and productivity levels associated with the undergraduate college lifestyle. This relationship did not yield a strong correlation ( $r = -.061, p < .05, \text{one-tailed}$ ). Determined as a major influence for healthy eating and body satisfaction in the literature review, the hypothesis could not be founded nor could the researcher suggest a correlation between the constructs of time/availability and satisfaction in body image (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 361). The results suggest that time and availability does not significantly affect food choice decisions and that they do not have a large effect on sentiments regarding body image.

The researcher hypothesized that health would be a significant factor in food choice decision making. Furthermore, the researcher believed that those who placed particular importance on the nutrition and level of health associated with their food choices would in turn experience greater satisfaction with body image. Regression analysis revealed that the subscale of health predicts only 4.9% of variance in the overall food choice score. This result indicates that health was of least consideration of the four factors representing in the 16-item food choice scale. The relationship between "Total Health" and overall body image was negatively correlated

( $r = -.221$ ,  $p < .05$ , one-tailed). For this sample, as importance of health in food choice increases, overall body image decreased.

The above finding conflicts with the research hypotheses stating that body image and health would be positively correlated, but supports some findings cited in the literature review. The notion of “health” may remain to be confused with the notion of “dieting”, which studies have shown to be perceived as synonymous for young women (Story, Neumark-Sztainer, Sherwood, Stang, & Murray, 1998, p. 1134). The researcher questions whether the subjects in this sample associate healthy eating habits with dieting in order to maintain or improve their body image. In the literature, it was reported that participants aged 18-30 were least likely to respond with optimism when discussing healthy eating habits (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 360). In this sample, the importance of healthy eating could be seen as synonymous with maintaining physical appearance, and thus this negative correlation may represent the sentiments regarding overall body image, instead of health and nutrition.

The aforementioned results correspond with the literature review and research speculations regarding the undergraduate women population and their food choice. There is a direct relationship between food choice and body image, specifically explained in the literature as “how their attempt to fit into an ideal affected the way they thought about food” (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 361). The results also lie parallel to the researcher’s overall motivation for conducting this study. In the target demographic, it appears that food choice was first and foremost a vehicle for maintaining, or enhancing physical appearance. It remained the most important factor in determining what the sample would consume. Despite this attentiveness towards improving physical appearance, body image satisfaction remained low. This suggests that while the sample may focus on eating for appearance, this thoughtfulness does not improve

their personal satisfaction with how they look. Furthermore, it could be that body image dissatisfaction drives the sample to report physical appearance as the greatest contributor to their food choice decisions. Through the findings, the researcher remains concerned that while the target population pays closest attention to food consumption as an aspect of physical appearance; their attempt for the ideal nevertheless feeds their dissatisfaction with body image. Overall, the results concluded that these four factors are important dimensions in understanding food choice in the undergraduate female population. More importantly, these factors remained negatively correlated to overall body image satisfaction.

### **Summary and Implications**

The present study has measured, by self-report, factors that affect food choice in the college-aged female population and the relationship between these factors and perceived body image. A review of the literature reveals that that health, appearance, cost, time and availability all serve as influential factors in the population's food choices, but literature remains deficient in comparing the variables of food choice and body image. This correlational study employed a survey research design with Likert-scaled questions to gain insight regarding food choice in seventy-five undergraduate students. The main findings suggest that the target population based food consumption primarily on its influence on physical appearance and that all measured food choice factors were associated with dissatisfaction with body image. Implications are considered below, primarily concerning the affects of social desirability, generalizability of this study and suggestions for further research in this field of study.

The introduction of the present study suggested that research regarding of factors that affect food choice would provide the current landscape of research with vital information concerning a population at-risk. As previously mentioned, the prevalence for eating disorders is

most common in females 15-24, the demographic studied in this quantitative analysis of food choice and body image (Hoek & van Hocken, 2003, p. 384). While the researcher did not intend to uncover information regarding the frequency of disordered eating in the study population, the researcher feared that those studied would cite physical appearance as their main motivation for making food choices. The findings confirmed this hypothesis. It is clear that the seventy-five undergraduate females studied report that considerations about physical appearance account for most of the variance in their food choice among factors measured. Despite this attentiveness, body image scores were negatively correlated to all four variables in this study. In short, it did not matter why a subject chose her food. The majority of subjects reported lower scores of body image in relation to employing each of the choice factors studied.

The researcher, a member of the surveyed demographic, understands these findings to be consistent to both the literature and societal norms. In the surveyed population, the desire to maintain a favorable physical appearance far outweighs remaining cost-effective, or health-conscious. The sample would sacrifice being on time or convenience in their food choices, but instead hold the notion of favorable physical appearance as essential. The researcher urges the undergraduate institution being studied to accept these findings as statistical evidence that their female students are at-risk for unhealthy eating habits, eating disorders, and subsequent health risks. The researcher suggests that the institution organize programs and larger initiatives to educate and advocate for appropriate food choice decisions based on positive implications, such as for health benefits, emotional security, and convenience in the college environment.

### **Limitations**

The researcher understands that the study at-hand regards topics that may evoke social discomfort for members of the surveyed study. The researcher understands that discomfort could

have occurred for participants responding to personal sentiments regarding their motivation for food choices and perceived and ideal body image. The items on both the food choice and the body image scale present the possibility of social desirability bias, a term used to describe the tendency of respondents to reply in a manner that will be viewed favorably by others (CITATION). The researcher understands the risk of social desirability bias when asking respondents to report their motivations for food choice and perceived body image. Respondents may be inclined to report their food choice, perceived and ideal body image in a manner that will associate their responses with societal norms. The researcher can only hope that the anonymity of the study decreased the incidence of social desirability bias in the results. Because the researcher maintained subject anonymity during the study, the researcher hopes that participants answered each item to the best of their ability and to the highest degree of their own opinion.

The findings of this study suggest that food choice in this specific population must be researched further. The researcher understands that generality of these findings serves as a major limitation to this study. These findings can only apply to both the sample and generalized to the greater population of undergraduate women at this specific institution of higher learning. The researcher invites others to conduct similar research at other colleges and universities to understand the factors of food choice and their affect on body image in the undergraduate female population nationwide.

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## Appendix A

Directions: Read each item and choose a number according based upon the provided scale.

Answer the following questions according to your lifestyle at college.

1. I often feel as though I cannot afford eating the food I want to eat.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|  
Always                  Usually                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

2. I eat food that I know is healthy for me.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|  
Always                  Usually                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

3. I eat diet foods.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|  
Always                  Usually                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

4. I don't have time to cook or prepare my meals.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|  
Always                  Usually                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

5. I eat food that is favorable for my physical appearance.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|  
Always                  Usually                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

6. I eat food on campus more than food outside of campus.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|  
Always                  Usually                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

7. I want to go out to eat but do not have the money to do so.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|  
Always                  Usually                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

8. I research what foods to eat to maximize my health.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|  
 Always                  Usually                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

9. I know the health advantages and disadvantages in the food I consume.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|  
 Always                  Usually                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

10. I have a desire to be thin.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|  
 Always                  Usually                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

11. I am too busy to put much thought into what I eat.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|  
 Always                  Usually                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

12. I'd rather spend money on other things than on food.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|  
 Always                  Usually                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

13. Most of my meals are consumed in the dining hall.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|  
 Always                  Usually                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

14. I make food choices based on what will affect my physical appearance.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|  
 Always                  Usually                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

15. Eating healthy food is a priority in my life.

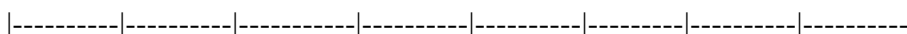
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|  
 Always                  Usually                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

16. I eat the food that is the least expensive.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|  
 Always                  Usually                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

17. Please circle the figure you believe best represents your physical appearance.

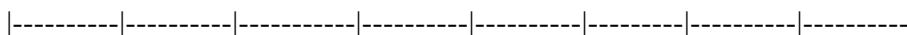
QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.



*Cardinal et al. (2010)*

18. Please circle the figure you believe best represents your IDEAL physical appearance.

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.



19. I believe the figure I circled is the best representation of my body.

Extremely Agree      Agree      Somewhat Agree      Somewhat Disagree      Disagree      Extremely Disagree

20. I am content with my physical appearance.

Extremely Agree      Agree      Somewhat Agree      Somewhat Disagree      Disagree      Extremely Disagree

21. I am content with how others view my physical appearance.

Extremely Agree      Agree      Somewhat Agree      Somewhat Disagree      Disagree      Extremely Disagree

## Appendix B

## Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.781 <sup>a</sup>	.611	.605	12.15022	.611	114.443	1	73	.000
2	.901 <sup>b</sup>	.813	.807	8.48804	.202	77.581	1	72	.000
3	.954 <sup>c</sup>	.911	.907	5.90104	.098	77.967	1	71	.000
4	.980 <sup>d</sup>	.959	.957	4.00359	.049	84.247	1	70	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), TotalAppearance

b. Predictors: (Constant), TotalAppearance, TotalCost

c. Predictors: (Constant), TotalAppearance, TotalCost, TotalTimeAvail

d. Predictors: (Constant), TotalAppearance, TotalCost, TotalTimeAvail, TotalHealth

**(F(4, 70)= 414.097, P<.001)**

## Appendix C

		TotalCost	TotalHealth	TotalTimeAvail	TotalAppearance
TotalBodyImage	Pearson	-.286	-.221	-.061	-.304
	Correlation				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.013	.057	.601	.008
	N	75	75	75	75