Comfort Foods: The Roles Food Plays in Our Lives

A study of the nature of our emotional relationships with food, the benefits of comfort food, and the dangers of emotional eating

Tag Words: Comfort foods, emotions, mood, physical health, mental health, obesity, emotional eating, overeating, eating behavior

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Summary

The notion of comfort foods is a popular idea, as it yields many positive mood benefits, from relationship bonding to the alleviation of sadness and loneliness. However, when continuously consumed for the sake of counteracting negative emotions, detrimental effects can impact an individual's physical and emotional health. Physical detriments include obesity, unhealthy levels of sugars, sodium, and bad cholesterol, as well as increased blood pressure. Emotional detriments include low emotional stability through misuse of comfort foods as an emotional crutch. Research has found that patterns of comfort food consumption are seen between different groups. Cultural differences also exist. Variance continues to be seen in how individuals derive their comfort effect. Comfort can be derived from nostalgic, indulgent, convenience based, or physical means. The prevalent use of comfort foods across a varied spectrum of derivation is a testament to the importance of its discussion. Our community service project aims to educate the public on the ideas surrounding comfort foods, including the benefits and detriments. A comfort food themed art gallery was created consisting of pieces of different media, and is meant to generate interest in learning by framing comfort food related knowledge in the form of art as entertainment. Additionally, our project serves the community of involved artists by providing additional notoriety through accreditation, and by providing the ability to collaborate with new contacts of various artistic mediums. We received 17 submissions from October 10, 2011 to November 10, 2011. Approximately 13 additional submissions are expected. Art forms include music, poetry, and visual art from more than 14 individuals who ranged ethnically from Korean, Japanese, African American, Italian, Filipino, and Egyptian. A total of more than 27 individuals expressed interest in participation. The project was designed to uplift the audiences through various arts and the appreciation of art. This provision of derived comfort is perhaps one of the greater forms of community service. (JM)

Video Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZZB5J7x6Fk
Comfort Foods: a study of the nature of our emotional relationships with food, the benefits of comfort food, and the dangers of emotional eating

Introduction

(RS) The popularity of the idea of comfort foods can be seen everywhere, from magazines to television shows, to advertisements. From women eating ice cream during break-ups to men enjoying a cold beer after a hard day’s work, the idea that certain foods can make us feel better when we’re feeling low or stressed is engrained deeply in our psyches. The biological reasons for these feel-good effects have been researched extensively. For example, high-calorie sweet foods can induce the production of endogenous opiates and serotonin in the body, both of which can alleviate negative feelings [1]. However, the emotional and psychological reasons comfort foods have such an effect on us have not been researched as well. While comfort foods can provide many benefits, the lack of information about them can prove to be a problem, as the over-consumption of comfort foods can prove to be unhealthy, both physically and mentally.

Those who have become dependent on the consumption of comfort foods to make themselves feel better can eventually suffer from the physical problems of obesity and all that comes with it. These risks include heart disease, strokes, high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, gallbladder disease, osteoarthritis, gout, and breathing problems [2][3]. There is also the risk of developing unhealthy eating behaviors such as emotional eating and overeating [2]. The fight against these problems have also focused mainly on the biological standpoint, studying effects of insulin and leptin on the body, rather than on how eating behavior and food choice can affect weight gain over the length of our lives [2].

Education and awareness can really go a long way towards fighting the detriments comfort food consumption can bring. Being aware of the way comfort foods affect us can lead us to having more self-control and practicing healthier eating behaviors.


What is Comfort Food and Why Do We Comfort Eat?

(RS) The human body has always possessed the biological need to gain energy from food, but as society has grown, we have come to depend on food as way to bond with others. Food has become a very important part of culture. As many different groups of people have a connection to each other through food, what we eat becomes psychologically linked to the people we spend time with and the events in which we consume certain foods [1]. Food has become a significant part of our emotional lives, especially since our food choices tend to be intimately linked with our memories [1]. As a source of nourishment, it has become not just important to our physical hunger, but to our emotional hunger as well.
The first known used of the term “comfort food” was used in 1977, and it is described as “food prepared in a traditional style having a usually nostalgic or sentimental appeal” [2]. This idea of comfort food has grown into a larger cultural phenomenon, as many foods are being advertised as providing comfort and enriching the ideas of family and happiness [3]. For example, Werther’s Original Caramels ran a commercial showing a loving family sharing this candy, and the catch phrase was “What comfort tastes like” [3]. Milky Way ran an advertisement in which a man was rejected by a romantic interested, and afterward ran to a chocolate bar for comfort [3]. It was centered on the phrase “Comfort in Every Bar”. McDonald’s even ran a campaign around their Chicken McNuggets, claiming, that they were made not just of chicken, but also of “comfort and joy” [3].

As our society has become more technologically advanced, the necessity for social interaction has diminished, as computers and telephones allow us to communicate with each other without actually having to be in each other’s presence. This generational change, though positive in many aspects, has had the detrimental effect of creating a feeling of dislocation and isolation in society [4]. Locher et al theorized that this social isolation contributes to the desire of control over the consumption of food objects [4]. In our consumption oriented society, the control over food items and the feelings that they evoke in us is a powerful tool by which we can assert a feeling of control over our own lives.

It has been found that comfort food is often eaten in times of emotional highs or emotional lows. During periods of negative feelings, comfort foods are used as a way to alleviate stress, anxiety, sadness, distress, and other emotions such as these [5]. During periods of positive feelings, comfort foods are used as a way to enhance mood or to reward oneself [6].

Locher et al made a very interesting observation regarding the solitary nature in which comfort food is prepared and eaten:

It is particularly ironic that while preparing and consuming comfort food is a solitary act, these activities evoke feelings connected to our relationships with special others. This is significant because the emotional bond occurs not only between the individual and the food object, but also between the individual and others whose memories the food object evokes. Thus, in a very important way, food acts as a mediator for social relationships that exist within the larger social order. [4]

This observation shows the important link between comfort food and memories of relationships. Though comfort foods may be consumed due to biological, neurological, or hormonal activity, not everyone chooses the same sorts of food. This shows that the emotional aspects of comfort eating prove to be just as influential to eating behaviors as physical aspects.

Types of Comfort Food and Who is Most Likely to Eat What

While there are many different types of foods that people like to eat to comfort themselves, the most popular comfort foods have been found to often fit into certain categories. In 2005, a study by Locher et al had a class of 264 undergraduate students at a large urban public university in the Southeast bring in foods that “made them feel good” or “provided them with comfort”, and then explain why they chose their certain food [1].

Locher et al found that amongst all the foods that the students brought in there were two similarities – the comfort foods that students brought in had a sense of familiarity, and they were identified as foods students ate when feeling down [1]. These foods were separated into four categories:

1) Nostalgic – Nostalgic foods are often connected to a particular time, event, or place in one’s history. They often conjure up memories of being cared for by someone and by sharing with those who care for you [1]. An example would be eating chicken soup when you are sick if your mother used to prepare chicken soup for you whenever you were sick.

2) Indulgent – Indulgent foods are often foods that are very high in sugar or fat, and consumers often know that these types of food are not healthy for them. They are often used as rewards for getting through a difficult obstacle or challenge [1]. Eating these kinds of food also often bring feelings of guilt after eating. An example would be cakes and cheesecakes, rich chocolates, or baked goods.

3) Convenience – Convenience foods are often chosen since one can experience the feeling of instant gratification. These are foods that are easy to prepare or have no preparation involved at all [1]. Locher et al found that convenience foods are often modified to make them seem more homemade, for example, by toasting or microwaving them to make them seem like they’re fresh out of the oven [1]. Examples of these foods are chips, candies, and microwavable foods like mac and cheese or pizza.

4) Physical comfort – Physical comfort foods are those that comfort through physical means [1]. This could be something hot (like hot chocolate) during the cold winter months or something cold (like ice cream) during the summer. Many times the physical comfort is also in the texture of the food, as some may prefer foods that are soft, gooey, thick, or crunchy. It can also refer to physical effects like responding to the caffeine in coffee or the effects of alcohol.

Below are two tables showing common and most popular comfort foods based on the studies by Locher et al as well as Wansink and Sangerman [1] [2]. To reiterate, Locher et al’s study involved having a class of 264 undergraduate students at a large urban public university in the Southeast bring in comfort foods. The data in Table two was collected from three different studies that Wansink and Sangerman did – one study was through a random sample of 411 people during telephone interviews, the second was from a random sample of 1005 people
during another 20 minute phone survey, and the third involved in-depth interviews of snack food fanatics [2].

**Table 1: Locher – Common Comfort Foods Brought to Class [1]**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chocolate chip cookies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peanut butter cookies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macaroni and cheese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fried chicken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice Krispie treats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirt pudding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweet potato casserole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meatballs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pies (various kinds)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2 : Wansink – Most Popular Comfort Foods [2]**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food</th>
<th>% of People from Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Potato chips</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice cream</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cookies</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candy</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pizza and Pasta</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beef/Steak burgers</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruits/Vegetables</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soup</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These comfort foods were often found to have certain common unhealthy qualities – high in calories, sugar, fat, carbohydrates, sodium, or any combination of these. While there were certain food items that were more popular than others, it must be taken into account that the random sampling of people used in these studies consisted of different ages, genders, and cultures. These differences provided much more information.

The comfort food eating behaviors between men and women varied significantly in different studies. Studies by Wansink, Sangerman, and Dube et al showed that women tended to comfort eat most often in response to negative emotions, whereas men tended to comfort eat in response to positive emotions [2] [3]. Women, eating in response to negative feelings, tended to gravitate towards high calorie sweet foods like ice cream, cookies, and chocolate, and the foods chosen were more snack like. After eating such foods, however, most women reported feeling guilt and regret afterward. Men on the other hand, gravitated towards meal-based foods, like macaroni and cheese, pizza, and pasta.
Lupton and Locher et al both theorized that this difference in food choice between genders may have to do with gender roles [4] [1]. Women, often put in the position of care-taker, may often view meals as a signal of labor and as a sign of providing love for someone else rather than being given love [1]. In many cases, women are often given chocolates and sweets as gifts from their loved ones, and this may be a reason for the discretion. For men, a sign of traditional masculinity has been eating hearty meals that others (often women) have cooked [4]. This connection of comfort with meals may also come from the idea that many men are often given food as a sign of love.

Comfort food eating behaviors also varied in the consumers’ ages. Dube et al found that younger people tended to comfort eat much more while experiencing negative emotions, while older people tended to comfort eat more while experiencing positive emotions [3]. This may be due to the expectation that with age, you learn to better regulate your emotions. It is also expected that positive emotions is a more powerful trigger for comfort food consumption for adults rather than for younger people.

Differences in culture also provided more range in comfort food eating behaviors. Dube et al found that cultural responses to food and consumption could influence eating behaviors [3]. For example, French people often participated in comfort eating, as the French tend to hold a “joie de vivre, carpe diem” sort of philosophy [3]. Anglo-Saxons hold different values in high regard – the ethics of hard work and the postponement of gratification [3]. The American culture is one that values larger portions and sizes when it comes to food, but this has also added to realization that such foods are a risk factor for health [3]. Thus, this may be a reason why many Americans feel guilt after consuming what they consider to be comfort foods.


**Introduction to Benefits and Detriments of Comfort Foods**

(RS) It is clear that the notion of comfort foods is a well-loved and universal idea. The appeal of comforting food is well-grounded. Benefits include connecting with others by sharing similar foods within cultures as well as partaking in meals within personal relationships. The process of eating foods that are associated with close relationships has not only a biological effect on the body, but positive emotional effects as well.

Despite the benefits, there are many detriments of consuming comfort foods that be cannot be ignored. Often times, the positive moods associated with consuming comfort foods are temporary, and the solitary act of eating comfort foods can usher in negative emotions like guilt and loneliness [1]. Additionally, comfort eating is often very closely associated with emotional eating – eating to alleviate feelings of anxiety, sadness, and other negative emotions. This kind of behavior, if not kept in check, can lead to serious detrimental eating behaviors (like emotional
eating and overeating), eating disorders (eating as an addiction or binge eating), as well as obesity [2].

It is important for us to explore the benefits and detriments of comfort food in order to have a better understanding of eating behavior and how to avoid the negative impacts it can have.


**Benefits of Comfort Foods**

(JM) There are a number of benefits to eating comfort foods. From a sociological or anthropological perspective, they provide a sense of cultural identity. From a personal or individual oriented perspective, they provide mental health and mood benefits in addition to comfort derived from nostalgia related elements.

Across large groups of people, comfort foods provide a positive effect on us by giving us a sense of social or cultural identity. This is seen in the frequent partaking of comfort foods specific to a culture or geographic region, whether at a family barbeque or in consumption of ethnic foods and snacks [1]. Consuming comfort foods that are specific to one’s background can give the person a sense of belonging. This is especially true since our society encourages people to use consumable based objects (including food) as a marker for one’s personal or social identity [2].

It has been shown that comfort foods can tie closely to a group’s personal identity. For example, studies have shown that immediately after periods of societal uncertainty and national crises, the sales of comfort foods, such as soup, mashed potatoes, and macaroni and cheese, increase [3]. This was especially prevalent after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, where increased consumption of comfort foods were shown to ameliorate mood effects on the populace [3].

In the instances discussed, comfort foods can be seen to evoke positive emotion and physiologically combat stress, including stresses involved in crisis involving large groups or populations. Due to this powerful presence food has in our lives, the idea of selling foods as “comforting” has been on the rise. Many restaurants have begun selling comfort food items in their menus, promising that it’s “just like Mom’s home-cooking”. There have even been numerous cookbooks published devoted to comfort food recipes. Many magazines and even television shows dedicate time and space to addressing comfort foods [3].

From an individualistic perspective, comfort foods can benefit us in the areas of mental health and in our mood. During activities of consumption, comfort foods temporarily boost mood. So when feeling depressed or sad, tired or bored, consuming comfort foods can lift these negative emotions [4]. This idea has been supported in a study by Troisi and Gabriel. In their experiment, they tested participants by putting them in a state of belongingness threat, then
asking them to think about food, and then asking them to rate their level of loneliness. To put
them in a state of belongingness threat, participants were asked to write for six minutes about a
fight with a close other. Then they were asked to write an experience about either eating a
favorite comfort food or trying a new food, with no time limit. Troisi and Gabriel found that after
priming this belongingness threat, individuals who wrote about a comfort food as opposed to a
new food experienced less loneliness than those who wrote about trying a new food [4]. These
comfort foods included favorite foods, familial, cultural, or traditional foods, or foods that were
part of the participant’s past or home life.

These negative feelings that are triggers for comfort food eating include during studying
or working, as well as feelings of stress, tiredness, and boredom. Comfort food eating tends to
reduce these feelings. Because many people either work or study in school, the prevalence of
comfort food consumption should not be too surprising [4]. Though the word consumption has
been used throughout this section, it should be noted that as little as thinking of comfort foods
provides benefits such as reducing loneliness and/or other potential mood benefits through
physiological means [4].

Another benefit to comfort foods is that they can stir up nostalgic feelings, reminding us
of times that we carry warm feelings for [1]. Romantic, idealized yearning, and happiness
induced by memories of the past can be considered as emotional benefits to an individual.
Comfort foods can provide a connection to these feelings, as they remind us of events such as
special gatherings, birthdays, and times spent with loved ones. Eating comfort foods can impact
us with these positive mood benefits as well as the simple pleasure of the physiological
satisfaction of consuming tasty food.

Nostalgia can be loosely defined as a yearning for the past that can trigger emotion
ranging from elated happiness to sorrow. For the purposes of the topic at hand, we will focus on
the comfort and happiness brought on by warm past memories when discussing nostalgia and
comfort foods. Nostalgia is linked to homesickness as remembering the home you left can make
you long for a time when you were still there. Comfort foods can remind of us home, where
these favorite foods might have been prevalent and where the people who prepared the food for
you may have lived. Because of their ability to remind us of home, comfort foods can ameliorate
effects of homesickness experienced by those who are far away from home, such as by students
who are living away from home as they leave to pursue higher education in colleges and
universities [4].

It should be noted that though these positive effects are temporary, that does not make
them negligible. Physical pain relief in the form of various drugs is prevalent in hospitals and in
self-medication. Though this relief is temporary, that does not mean to say that their benefits
should not be considered. Analogously, reduction in immaterial pains can be regarded in a
similar light, as a slight benefit, though not without its noteworthy downsides.

Detrimental effects or harmful qualities of comfort foods include regular consumption leading to formational excess of fat, contribution to the problem of obesity, provision of only temporary effects with the potential for unhealthy tradeoff, and the provision of potential of an unhealthy mental crutch with physical consequences.

The carbohydrates, sugars, and high fat content found in both snack type and more hearty comfort foods can affect a person’s physical health and as well as their fat levels [1]. Ranging from cookies and ice cream to pillow-y mounds of mashed potatoes, these comfort foods may contribute to unhealthy weight gain.

Eating comfort foods to combat negative emotions such as anxiety, boredom, or depression to experience comfort can be characterized as unhealthy both physically and mentally. Two eating behaviors in particular can be linked to unhealthy comfort eating habits – emotional eating and overeating [1]. As Levitan and Davis describe it, emotional eating involves the consumption of high-caloric, highly palatable foods, while overeating can be a form of addiction [1]. Both of these behaviors are unhealthy physically because of uneven caloric intake weighed against calories metabolized. This results in the previously mentioned fat gain due to more calories being taken in as opposed to burned or used up.

This general assertion is made because comfort food consumption during emotional eating and overeating is associated with sedentary behavioral patterns or general lack of activity. Example scenarios would include the classic couch potato scenario, eating for prolonged periods in bed, and other stay at home situations where there is a lack of exercise. This lack of activity can also be due to negative moods and emotions such as sadness, or due to feelings such as longing, or fullness after consuming a large amount of comfort food.

Due to these associations, comfort food consumption can be seen as adding to the overarching problem of obesity [1], which comes with many other health risks. These risks include heart disease and stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, gallbladder disease, osteoarthritis, gout, and breathing problems [2]. Obesity is a serious issue considering all the medical conditions that can arise from it, as well as the fact that people who are obese are at an increased risk for chronic disease [2]. Additionally, all that potential extra weight that can come from the regularly paced consumption of comfort foods and sedentary behavior can detract from personal mobility, as it is harder to carry extra weight. As it becomes harder to move and tiredness sets in more easily, this may act as a catalyst for further sedentary behavior and lack of exercise and maybe even more comfort food consumption.

Though the physiological and psychological induction of positive emotions before, during, and after consuming comfort foods can and should be considered a benefit, it should be noted that the effects are only temporary. The fact that these effects do not last longer can be...
considered a slight detriment. The drawback comes from the idea that in order to maintain these positive effects and have a prolonged, aggregated effect, the rate of consumption must be fast-paced and continuous. Such regular consumption can be unhealthy as mentioned earlier. The tradeoff of temporary positive effects for unhealthy weight gain can be considered an important detriment to comfort foods.

Aside from physically, there are unhealthy mental effects of eating comfort foods as well. People can use the food-derived feelings they get from eating comfort foods as an emotional crutch. Such reliance should not be considered as the sturdiest foundation for personal, emotional stability, as it is analogous to a harmful addiction with imbalanced tradeoffs [1]. The use of comfort foods as a crutch is closely related to eating disorders like binge eating or compulsive eating, which are rather dangerous incarnations of comfort food consumption.

The two eating behaviors mentioned before, emotional eating and overeating, can be considered the peak of dangerous incarnations of comfort food consumption [1]. For many people trying to lose weight and eat healthier, it is getting stuck in these behaviors that are the toughest challenges to overcome. A study by Gibson and Desmond show that the reinforcement of pleasure occurs when eating the same palatable food during times of emotional lows [3]. This reinforced pleasure derived from eating makes it difficult for people to stop emotional eating.

Overeating, as a form of food addiction, can also be very dangerous and the feelings involved are very difficult to fight. Multiple studies show that simple rewarding behaviors, such as comfort eating, can induce the same types of effects that addictive drugs produce in the body, especially when used to alter one’s mood [3] [4]. This dependence on food can produce the same deleterious effects as a dependence on drugs – loss of control, cravings, and compulsive behaviors [5]. Trying to quit the addictive behavior of overeating can also produce withdrawal effects [6].


Where Do We Go From Here?

(RS) While comfort foods can certainly provide us a lot of joy as well as something to bond with others over, it is clear that the idea of comfort food contributes to the dangerous epidemic of obesity and unhealthy behaviors like emotional eating and overeating [1]. Most studies about obesity have focused mainly on the metabolic and hormonal reasons behind why it happens as opposed to the emotional and behavioral reasons [1]. This makes the prevention and treatment of
obesity and other eating disorders more difficult, as food intake, eating behaviors, and weight regulation over the lifespan is very much linked to food choices and emotions [2].

It would easy to tell an obese person that the solution to their problem would be exercise and eat healthier foods, but ignoring the basic biological processes of craving is often too difficult [1]. Mietus-Snyder and Lustig have theorized that evolutionary processes have allowed us to develop biological signals that protect us from starvation. Our bodies work in such a way in that we gain intense pleasure and reward from eating high-calorie, highly palatable foods [3].

So far, many agree that adolescence is the critical time to intervene and develop healthier ideas about eating and preventing obesity, especially since this is time of great stress and weight gain [1]. Reducing stress through meditation has proven to be mildly successful in regards to controlling eating behavior [1]. However, more studies need to be done to figure out beneficial ways of preventing and treating obesity through behavioral modification and changing the ways people think about food.


Service Project: Comfort Foods: DESSERT-ation

(JM/RS) Our service project focuses on spreading awareness about the effects of eating comfort foods and its benefits and detriments. It also focuses on educating our audience on alternate potential outlets one can utilize to gain the same positive effects of eating comfort foods without the unhealthy consequences.

We created a main website at http://dessertation.tumblr.com which acts as a gallery of art submissions from various contributing artists of different media. The gallery serves as a beacon to produce interest in comfort food related issues highlighted in our research. It includes illustrations and paintings from visual artists as well as related poems and literature from writers. These artists and writers were given prompts regarding what “comfort food” meant to them, what benefits or detriments it can bring to people’s lives, as well as other forms of healthier derived comfort.

This prompt functioned as a community service to both the artists as well as the viewers of the gallery. The prompt for contribution to the gallery was responded to by more than 10 artists, all of whom had to think deeply about what comfort foods mean to them. The gallery also provides a thought-provoking experience for the main audience who were able to appreciate the art and connect it to their own lives as well.

Our online gallery is meant to generate interest in the issues of comfort foods by framing related knowledge in the form of entertainment as art. Since the gallery is a form of entertainment, this enforces the retention of material in the minds of the audience. Generated interest, and personal thought stemming from the gallery, is meant to act as a catalyst for
awareness and future learning provided by pieces and linked literature, including researched information from our classipedia. This project educates both the artists and the viewers about the effects of comfort food.

Additionally, our project serves the community of involved artists by providing additional notoriety through accreditation, and by providing the ability to collaborate with new contacts of various artistic mediums. Artists involved include those of diverse skill levels. This is meant to show a range of artistic interpretation analogous to the range of effect comfort foods have on different types of individuals. The project was designed to uplift the audiences through various arts and the appreciation of art. This provision of derived comfort is perhaps one of the greater forms of community service.

The community service project was exposed in a number of different ways. These include our letters to the editor, our YouTube video, and exposure on social media outlets and artist’s personal websites. Our letters were sent to eight food related magazines, including Everyday Food, Everyday with Rachael Ray, Food and Wine, Food Network Magazine Bon Appetit, Cooking Light, Eating Well, and Taste of Home. Our letters included a link to our website. Our YouTube video, uploaded to the DRJULIEFAGANSTUDENTS channel advertises our research project and website gallery. We also advertised the project on websites like Facebook, Twitter, and DeviantArt, and allowed the artists who contributed to the project to advertise it on their own websites as well.

The name of our project is a play on the word “dissertation,” which is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as an extended, usually written treatment of a subject (specifically one submitted for a doctorate). While this project is certainly not conserved a formal dissertation, it has roots in the academic world. The art project sprung from our ideas when writing our research paper (which can be considered an extended written treatment on the subject of comfort foods) for this class.

From the dates of October 10, 2011 – November 10, 2011, we received 17 submissions. Media included music, watercolor, digital art, vector art, poetry, and even a pumpkin carving. All artists submitting pieces from this time period were from the US. As of the submission of this paper on December 7, 2011, we still have 13 pending submissions that we will add once they are received. Artists from this second time period in are from the USA, Netherlands, and Spain, and the pieces will range from digital art, street art, photography, music, and literature. All of these artists have varying cultural backgrounds ranging from American, Korean, Japanese, African American, Italian, Filipino, and Egyptian. Throughout the semester, we have had total 27 artists express interest in this project who have submitted/planned to submit pieces.

It was very interesting to see how the pieces we received corresponded/did not correspond to our research findings. An original digital vector art piece by “Beyx” (Figure 1) displays a dark haired young woman sitting in what looks to be a lotus position, closing her eyes. A smile is on her face while food items like a cheeseburger, fries, bacon, tomatoes, cheese wedges, soda, and condiments float in the background. The piece is made with warm, soft, happy colors. This piece is a prime example of the main function of comfort food – to comfort. “Beyx” obviously expresses a happy, positive feeling associated with these foods. It is interesting to note
that “Beyx” is an American female - her food choices did not correspond with the idea that females choose sweets and snack type foods, but they do correspond with what foods Americans culturally prefer.

Another digital art piece called “Just us…” by “HaeTae” (Figure 2) shows a male and female couple sitting at a table with their backs turned to the viewer. The piece is drawn in black and white lines, with the food highlighted in color – pizza sitting on the table between them. The steam floats up from their hot food in gray lines, spelling out “just us…” This piece highlights the idea that comfort food can be used to connect with others or remember fond memories.
The digital art piece by Dylan Deeth (Figure 3) is a perfect example of how the overconsumption of comfort foods can cause obesity. In the piece, an obese man is shown eating an ice cream cone full of pancakes, mac and cheese, fried chicken, a large gummy bear, and other non-distinguishable food items. The colors surrounding the man are roughly scratched, perhaps displaying a sense of turmoil or loss of control. The obese man doesn’t seem to be enjoying his consumption – his face seems more twisted in pain or frustration. This also goes along with the research that shows how many people feel guilt after eating comfort foods.
These pieces are just a sampling of what was submitted for the Comfort Foods: DESSERT-ation project. The pieces really show that while comfort food behaviors and emotions often fall into patterns, they can still be extremely varied from individual to individual. We plan on keeping this project open indefinitely so that we can continue receiving and showcasing pieces and inspiring people to think about the effect that comfort food has on their lives.

Table 3: Basic information about artists and art that was submitted to Comfort Foods: DESSERT-ation between dates of 10/10/11 – 11/10/11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Country of Residence</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Media Submitted</th>
<th>Food in Piece</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Niko Leiva</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Late Teens</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>None Provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Psykon_Beats”</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Late Teens</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>None Provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“GordonFreman”</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Not Provided</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>African American</td>
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References


**Letters to the Editor**

(RS)

Sent to four food magazines - Everyday Food, Everyday with Rachael Ray, Food and Wine, and Food Network Magazine (11/15/11)

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Riza Sarmiento and I am a student at Rutgers University. My partner, Justin Marcelino, and I, have been working on a research project about comfort foods. From this we have gathered a team of artists and developed an art project focusing on the benefits and detriments surrounding comfort foods and emotional eating. Here is a short article discussing the problem surrounding comfort foods and providing a link to our art project, Comfort Foods: DESSERT-ation. We hope that you may consider publishing it. Thank you very much for your time!

Regards,

Riza Sarmiento
Comfort Foods: Harmful or Helpful?

It’s no doubt that comfort foods are a significant part of our lives. From apple pie and ice cream to macaroni and cheese (whether homemade or not), comfort foods can seem to magically alleviate our sadness and loneliness. They can bring us back to the good times that we’ve spent with our loved ones, and can even be the foundation on which to build good memories with them. Comfort foods can feed our emotional hunger as well as our physical hunger. Unfortunately, many can agree that the society in which we live has become increasingly emotionally hungry. Social networking like Facebook and Twitter, and technologies like smartphones have us believing we are more connected than ever, but the decrease in face-to-face, human-to-human interactions have us feeling more isolated and alone. Compound this with societal anxieties over the recession, the war, and even going as far back as 9/11, and it’s not surprising to see that the consumption of comfort foods have increased in the past decade.

However, this increase in the consumption of comfort foods should have us worried. The benefits of comfort foods are temporary, while the health effects can be long-lasting. The physical problems of obesity and all that comes with it (risks of heart disease, strokes, high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, gallbladder disease, osteoarthritis, gout, and breathing problems) is a serious concern for those who have become dependent on the consumption of comfort foods to make themselves feel better, not to mention the negative implications of using food as an emotional crutch. Unhealthy eating behaviors, such as emotional eating and overeating, can be considered the peak of dangerous incarnations of comfort food consumption.

What should we do about the connection comfort foods can have to unhealthy behaviors? Many researchers are focused on the biological effects of food, but fewer are focused on the emotional and behavioral connections we have with food. We have to be aware that food intake and weight regulation stems mainly from food choices and emotions.

It is much easier to change our behaviors when we become aware of them. Patterns that have been observed in studies are that women gravitate towards sweet and snack type foods to provide them comfort, whereas men crave meal-related foods when feeling down. When it comes to age, younger people are seen to comfort eat more than older people. The types of comfort foods people choose also have patterns – some choose certain foods for nostalgic reasons, while others choose certain foods as rewards. There are also foods that are comforting due to the physical attributes one experiences while eating them as well as foods that are eaten out of convenience. No matter the reason, it is important for people to be aware of their food choices and how these choices can affect them.
We, two Rutgers University students, are working on a project about comfort foods which focuses on our emotional relationships with food, the benefits of comfort food, as well as the dangers of emotional eating. From the ideas gathered from our research, we have developed a project we call “Comfort Foods: DESSERT-ation”, an art project centered on comfort food-related ideas and issues. We hope that through this art project acts a catalyst for awareness and future learning about the emotional eating and the effects of comfort food. The Comfort Foods: DESSERT-ation project can be found at http://dessertation.tumblr.com, and we hope you visit us as the project nears completion. New pieces, such as a storybook, videos, and other content will be continually added to the project. We hope that you and your readers may visit it and take away a lesson or two on comfort foods as well as enjoy the hard work our artists put into their pieces.

(JM)
Sent to four food magazines - Bon Appetit, Cooking Light, Eating Well, and Taste of Home (11/15/11)

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Justin Marcelino and I am a student at Rutgers University. My partner, Riza Sarmiento, and I, along with a wonderful team of artists, have been working on a research project about comfort foods. We have developed a community service art project focusing on the benefits and detriments of comfort foods and emotional eating. Here is a short article discussing the problems surrounding comfort foods, providing a link to our art project in progress, Comfort Foods: DESSERT-ation. We hope that you consider publishing the article in some form. Thank you very much for your time.

With spicy, peppery, jalapeno love,
Justin Marcelino

Comfort Foods and Related Health Issues

The average person would probably say they partake in comfort food consumption. Comfort foods, by common definition, are known to comfort us, but most people probably wouldn’t know of some of the non-intuitive intricacies that are involved. Some things about comfort foods that we don’t normally think about, or don’t give enough importance to, may include the way comfort foods affect us, their detriments, the variance in how they affect us, and what we can do to ameliorate the negative affects while still reaping the positive benefits.

Patterns of Consumption
It has been observed that the modes in which comfort foods affect us possess basic patterns. Patterns of consumption are seen with females and younger individuals favoring sweet and snack type comfort foods, and males and older individuals favoring hearty or meal type comfort foods. Cultural patterns of consumption also exist, with the consumption providing function in cultural identity. Becoming conscious of these patterns can help us manage the effects of comfort foods on our selves. Understanding the way in which we are affected, and how we are affected, provide us an avenue for self-control.

Reasons for Consumption

Along with patterns of consumption, knowledge of underlying reasons and their detrimental effects are also useful. Reasons for consuming comfort foods include, but are not limited to, filling emotional voids, counteracting boredom, and counteracting negative emotions. Consuming them for these reasons can leave us physically and emotionally unhealthy. Physical unhealthiness would be characterized by the obvious detriments of too much “junk”. Emotionally or psychologically speaking, using comfort foods in the ways described above put us in a state of low emotional stability, with solutions only temporary.

Ways Comfort is Derived

The phrase concerning variance and mode of effect is quite ambiguous. But what is meant is that the way comfort is derived by an individual varies from person to person, just as how patterns and reasons vary. Comfort can be derived from nostalgic, indulgent, convenience based, or physical means. Becoming conscious of these modes of derivation can again help us manage the effects of comfort foods on our selves. If we have an idea of how comfort is derived, we can seek healthier alternative sources to supplement our comfort food consumption.

Community Service Project

In relation to what is discussed above, I am participating in a community service project affiliated with Rutgers University, which centers on comfort foods. Topics touched upon include what is discussed in this article, backed by research. The project attempts to act as a catalyst in sparking thought revolving around comfort foods, while also being fun for the audience and for those contributing to the project. When a subject is fun or entertaining in its presentation, we can often times find ourselves more susceptible to learning about that subject.

In its simplest description, the project uses an art gallery, consisting of different art mediums, as a vehicle for accomplishing the goal as an educative catalyst. Pieces in the gallery (still in progress) range from visual art, to music, to poems, and more. Please visit us at
http://dessertation.tumblr.com/ as the project nears completion and new pieces, such as a storybook, videos, and other content are added to the project.