“Food for Thought” Attitudes and Behaviours Towards Food Choices Through Culture, Emotions and Social Influence

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Word Count:7624

4th April 2025

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Declaration

Declaration

‘I declare that this thesis that I have submitted to Dublin Business School for the award of BA (Hons) Psychology is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated, where it is clearly acknowledged by references. Furthermore, this work has not been submitted for any other degree.’

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Signed: Michelle Lucas

Date: 04/04/2025

Acknowledgments

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Abstract

The aim of this qualitative research was to explore the attitudes and behaviours towards food choices through cultural, emotional, psychological and social influences within the general population. Additionally, factors that affect dietary choices and identify opportunities that promote healthier dietary habits and improve overall public health through the development of policies and strategies. The methodology was conducted through semi structured interviews of six participants from Ireland over 18 years. Ethical approval was granted by the DBS ethical committee before the recruitment of participants by using purposive sampling. Through thematic analysis five main themes were developed highlighting the complexities of food choices. Finding many aspects of life and memories that are made around food, particularly through family traditions. Future research of a larger sample size by use of a mixed methods approach within a multicultural society would be beneficial due to the significance of cultural backgrounds in shaping dietary habits.

"Food for Thought" Attitudes and Behaviours Towards Food Choices Through Culture, Emotions and Social Influence

Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2017 approximately 950,000 deaths in the European Union were attributed to unhealthy eating habits, highlighting the fundamental effect of food on human life (Picó et al., 2019). Food also serves as not only a source of nutrition but also as an important component of cultural (Janssen et al., 2017), social, and emotional identity (Bourke et al., 2024; Nezlek & Forestell, 2019). According to Chen & Antonelli (2020) the European Commission aims to improve the health and sustainability of the EU food system by focusing on consumer food choices. However, this aim is difficult to achieve as daily dietary decisions are multifaceted and impacted by a complex interaction of personal, societal, and environmental influences (Enriquez & Archila-Godinez, 2021). Research by De Ridder et al. (2017) highlights that maintaining healthy eating patterns is essential for preventing chronic illnesses such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Although there is a general understanding of these advantages in reducing the risk of chronic disease, Cena and Calder (2020) highlight that many individuals struggle to follow healthy diets because of psychological and environmental barriers, such as stress and social influences (Antonopoulou et al., 2019). To enhance long term commitment to healthy eating habits, De Ridder et al. (2017) highlights the importance of integrating individual focused strategies such as self-regulation and goal setting with broader systemic approaches.

The aim of this current study is to explore how cultural, emotional, psychological, and social influences shape public attitudes and behaviours related to food choices. By using qualitative analysis, it aims to understand how factors affect dietary choices and to identify

opportunities for policies and strategies that promote healthier dietary habits and improve overall public health. Research highlights how food choices influence mental health, highlighting how particular eating patterns can affect mood and emotional health (Firth et al., 2020). By exploring these elements this current study aims to shed light on the interconnected factors driving food behaviours and identify opportunities for targeted public health strategies.

1.1: Cultural Influences on Food Choices

Cultural background plays a fundamental role in shaping individual food choices and behaviours (Jeong & Lee, 2021). From early childhood, cultural norms and traditions may influence dietary habits and may also determine not only how food is eaten but how it is prepared, consumed, and valued within a group. According to De Cosmi et al. (2017), initial taste experiences, influenced by cultural backgrounds, play a crucial role in determining food preferences that can last into adulthood. These cultural influences may affect attitudes towards specific foods and dietary habits, incorporating aspects like meal structure, portion size and food related traditions (Sproesser et al., 2022).

Cultural influences on food are varied (Neufeld et al., 2021), demonstrating regional, ethnic, and religious differences (Wijaya, 2019). For instance, the Mediterranean diets known for its significant intake of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and olive oil, is firmly embedded in the cultural traditions of Mediterranean countries (Guasch-Ferré & Willett, 2021). Research indicates that adherence to diets such as the mediterranean diet is associated with reduced risks of chronic diseases and improved mental health (Ventriglio et al., 2020). Conversely, Western diets which are dominated by processed foods and high sugar intake have been linked to harmful health outcomes that include obesity and depression (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2023).

According to Hanus (2018), globalisation has created a dual effect on cultural food practices by enabling access to a variety of cuisines and expanding culinary experiences while also leading to the decline of traditional food practices with the rising of consumption of processed and fast food which replace traditional diets in many areas. Research by García-Dorado et al. (2019) found that traditional diets typically highlight nutritional balance, whereas modern dietary trends often focus more on convenience than on health benefits.

In addition to regional and ethnic influences, socioeconomic elements within cultural settings significantly impact health outcomes (Williamson et al., 2020). For example, individuals from lower income backgrounds may depend on inexpensive calorie rich foods due to financial limitations, resulting to differences in health status. Therefore, the impact of culture on food selection is closely related to socio-economic circumstances, necessitating a true understanding to tackle health disparities effectively (Jiao, 2024). The study by Jiao (2024) focuses on the need to promote population health overall which is what the current study is aiming for through informed health policies.

1.2: Emotional and Psychological influences on Food Choices

Emotions and psychological factors are critical elements of food behaviours that often drive decisions in subconscious ways (Kaneko et al., 2018). Research by Dakanalis et al. (2023) show that food is used frequently as a coping tool, people tend to turn to specific foods to manage stress, anxiety or sadness. Comfort eating, which involves consuming foods that are high in calories, sugar, or high in fat, often occurs as a reaction to negative emotions (Spence, 2017). According to Wallace and Fordahl (2021) these behaviours stem from the brain's reward system, this is where specific foods prompt a dopamine release, and it generates a brief sensation of pleasure.

Conversely, food choices are also influenced by positive emotions (Stasi et al., 2017), Celebratory events are sometimes marked by indulgent eating, highlighting the role of food

as a source of pleasure and bonding (Evers et al., 2018). However, unhealthy patterns can be formed from emotional eating, particularly when it develops into a routine reaction to emotional motivations instead of an indication of hunger. This highlights the psychological complexity of eating behaviours where rational decision-making processes are sometimes disregarded by emotional states (González et al., 2022).

Psychological well-being is also strongly linked to dietary patterns (Adan et al., 2019). Research by Aucoin et al. (2021) indicates that diets rich in fruits, vegetables and omega 3, such as in the mediterranean diet are associated with reduced rates of anxiety and depression. This suggests that emotions alone do not influence food choices but also dietary choices which may impact mental health. To develop interventions that promote both psychological well-being and healthy eating habits, it is essential to understand this bidirectional relationship (Bremner et al., 2020).

1.3: Body Image

The relationship between psychology and food is further complicated by body image and self-esteem (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). This is mainly due to the societal pressure to adhere to specific standards that often force people towards restrictive or unbalanced eating habits, leading to potential effects for both physical and mental well-being (Sinha et al., 2024). For example, dieting aimed at achieving unrealistic body ideals may lead to disordered eating patterns, this in turn could create a cycle of guilt, shame, and an unhealthy relationship with food (Craven & Fekete, 2019). Therefore, tackling the psychological aspects of food choices requires a comprehensive strategy that considers emotional health, social factors, and ways of coping. Findings from 22 qualitative studies by Walker-Clarke et al. (2022) found that early life food experiences in older adult's impact eating behaviours at a later stage. The current study aims to look at this but within the general population from the age of 18 years onwards.

Body image and people with gender dysphoria is addressed by Milano et al. (2019) which looks at the challenges that are faced by gender diverse and transgender people. It's worth noting that the current study aims to explore how cultural backgrounds impact eating behaviours within the general population, however Milano et al. (2019) does not adapt the cultural considerations for the cohort they cover in their paper. As the current is focused on adults, some of the research will explore how eating habits are influenced by others they see or spend time with, this may be family members or friends. Although this is an important focus the need for early intervention when promoting positive body image is critical. Guest et al. (2022) do just that among children, they assess how effective various programs are that aim to enhance satisfaction and reduce dissatisfaction in children. The study shows some strengths by examining a large number of interventions, however further research should consider making it more adaptable for males and like the current study it may be useful to measure in a qualitative manner to receive a richer how and why answer to the research.

1.4: Social Influences on Food Choices

Social environments play a significant role in shaping eating behaviours and food choices (Marcone et al., 2020). Family and friends often act as primary influences, particularly during stages of early development. For example, family meals do not only encourage dietary habits they also adopt a sense of identity and belonging through food (Mahmood et al., 2021). Haines et al. (2019) highlight how the role of family and its dynamics significantly influence eating behaviours, noting that parents are often the prominent role model for dietary behaviours in children.

As times are changing and more fathers are staying at home with children than ever before they have a more active role in their child's dietary needs weather it's making breakfast or preparing lunch for the school day. Rahill et al. (2019) explored this in more detail examining the role of fathers in shaping their child's eating habits, what they found was

that long term eating behaviours in children can be positively and negatively influenced by their fathers' eating behaviours, what they also found was that mothers as the primary caregiver influenced the extent of the paternal involvement. Moreover, fathers employed an authoritarian role during mealtimes when compared to mothers. The current study will qualitatively examine family influences in adults from 18 years of age and over compared to the qualitative and quantitative nature of Rahill et al. (2019) which only examined from birth to early adulthood. However, the review does highlight the fundamental whole family approach when aiming to improve dietary habits in children and takes the influence of both parents into consideration.

Peers also contribute to food behaviours specifically during adolescence and young adulthood (Stok et al., 2018). Social environments often encourage individuals to align with the behaviours of the group, resulting in people eating similar foods to those around them. This influence extends to behaviours of both healthy and unhealthy eating patterns (Chung & Rimal, 2016). However, this may depend on existing norms within the group, for example, peer groups that are more health conscious may promote balanced diets, while groups who have less nutritional awareness may promote unhealthy habits (Munt et al., 2016).

A review in the Psychology of Sport and Exercise analysed 24 studies on how athletes eating behaviours are influenced by their teammates. They found that the promotion of healthy eating can be fostered in such environments and the pressure to maintain a certain appearance may led to a negative relationship with food and then a dissatisfaction with their body, additionally the pressure from team leaders was also noted and the negatives affects it may have on an individual. Nevertheless, the findings are a good advocate for the development of healthy eating practices and intervention strategies.

1.5: Social Media

Social influences on food are further amplified by media, this includes advertising and social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook and TikTok (Powell & Pring, 2023). Processed and fast food are often promoted using marketing campaigns, capitalising on emotional and convenience narratives (Cairns, 2019), Furthermore, Social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for shaping food behaviours, more particularly among younger cohorts (Goodyear et al., 2021). Rounsefell et al. (2019) found that been exposed to food related content on social media significantly influenced dietary choices, having both positive and negative outcomes. Moreover, healthy eating and fitness is promoted by some influencers, while others contribute to the normalisation of unhealthy behaviours through encouragement of high calorie and low nutrient foods (Chau et al., 2018). Research by Wu et al. (2023) examines social media content and its relationship with body image and eating behaviours, their findings indicate the high connection between body image and eating behaviours suggesting the need thorough research so this relationship can be better understood and like the current study aim to promote healthier eating content on social media platforms.

The connection between social media and food behaviours also raises concerns about unrealistic portrayals of diets and body image through misinformation (Malloy et al., 2024). For example, flawless images of food and body type may generate pressure to mimic standards that are unachievable, which can lead to unhealthy eating habits and dissatisfaction with body image (Klassen et al., 2018). As a result, while these social influences may encourage positive behaviours there is also risks which must be tackled through education initiatives and awareness programs (Ghahramani et al., 2022). The current study does aim to target public health strategies which in turn may be used in the education of the public on such risks.

1.6: Network of Cultural, Emotional, Psychological, and Social Factors

The relationship between cultural, emotional, psychological, and social factors creates a complicated network of influences on food choices (Fernqvist et al., 2024). Not operating in isolation, these elements intersect in ways that shape individual and collective behaviours. For instance, during social events cultural norms may dictate the type of food that is consumed, while portion size and frequency of indulging may be influenced by emotional states. Similarly, specific dietary behaviours may be promoted by social media trends and emotional appeals (Baker et al., 2022). To develop holistic approaches to food related interventions it is critical to understand these connections (Nair et al., 2016). For example, when addressing emotional eating psychological support alone may not be sufficient, however, cultural understanding and social support may also be required (Power et al., 2025). Furthermore, encouraging nutritious eating habits in diverse communities requires an understanding of cultural preferences, social interactions, and emotional motivations. Researchers and policy makers may be able to design more effective strategies to improve public health outcomes if the interconnected nature of these factors are recognised (Bédard et al., 2020), the current study aims to improve overall public health through education.

1.7: Rationale

Food choices have a significant impact on public health, however, factors influencing these decisions are complicated, spanning across cultural, emotional, psychological and social areas (Krause et al., 2016). While quantitative research has widely documented correlations between dietary patterns and health outcomes, the lived experiences and subjective perspectives that drive food related behaviour is overlooked. This gap in the literature highlights the reason for the qualitative aspect of this study to capture the complexities of individual and societal influences on food choices.

To address these gaps this current study will aim to explore the complex ways cultural norms, emotional states and social environments may shape individual eating habits. Through a qualitative lens and the use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis aids in identifying key themes and provide rich in-depth data through semi structured interviews (Hammarberg et al., 2016), that can then address attitudes and behaviours towards food choices. Furthermore, another aim of the current study is to provide insights that inform interventions and public health policies for the promotion of healthier eating habits in helping to reduce the burden of diet related illnesses.

1.8: Research Questions

In order to effectively examine the attitudes and behaviours towards food choices in the general public and how they are influenced by cultural, social, emotional and psychological factors the qualitative nature of this research will focus on the following research questions:

Q1- How does cultural background impact on attitudes and behaviours relating to food choice and consumption?

Q2- What impact does emotions and psychological factors have on eating habits and attitudes towards choosing healthy verses unhealthy foods?

Q3- How do social influences such as family, friends and the media impact attitudes and behaviours towards food?

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Participants

To meet the inclusion criteria of category A participants were over 18 years and from the general population who have consented to take part in the study The sample is assigned research category A because participants do not fall into vulnerable groups and there was no risk to participants as it involves capable adults who were competent to consent (see Appendix C). As the study was category A people with learning difficulties, no understanding of the study, vulnerable groups, or people under 18 were part of the exclusion criteria along with those who did not consent to take part, however all participants consented, and the researcher did not require garda vetting. The number of participants chosen to take part was 6. They ranged in age and gender with three males and three females the males were aged between 23 and 50 years and the females aged between 18 and 54. The recruitment of participants was by use of purposive sampling involving emailing participants inviting them to participant (see Appendix A), the nature of the study was explained and consent obtained prior to participating was ensured. Two interviews were conducted using Teams and four in person. The four in person interviews were conducted in a meeting room at the participants place of work as this suited the participants. There was no monetary incentive as part of this study. The participants were important for this study because they represented the general population, and a large range of experience can be captured on attitudes towards food that can help to encourage healthier food choices within society. The researcher felt a connection with some of the responses given such as media can influence dietary habits.

2.2: Design

This study was a qualitative design that involved the collection of non-numerical data by using semi structured interviews conducted both in person and online via Teams whichever was suitable to the participant and researcher at the time. The aim of this design

was to gain an understanding of the attitudes and behaviours related to food in the general public. Also, it's flexible and subjective and was used to collect rich data on participants experiences, perceptions and decision-making processes around food choices. The key themes that emerged from the data is identified through thematic analysis providing an understanding of the social, cultural and emotional elements impacting eating behaviours.

The key areas of interest were as follows:

- The impact of culture on food choices
- Emotional responses associated with food consumption
- Social influences that include family, friends and media on eating behaviours

2.3: Materials & Apparatus

The materials used in the study consisted of an introductory email(see Appendix A) for participant recruitment, an information sheet (see Appendix B), which explained what was involved in participation and their right to leave the study at any time, and for participants to acknowledge they understand and agree to take part in the study a consent form (see Appendix C) was also provided. Also, an interview schedule (see Appendix D). And to assist with any challenges participants may have had during the interview a debrief sheet (see Appendix E), which contained contact details for help, and it also gave participants a summary of the purpose of the study and how the data will be used.

The interview schedule used in the study contained open ended questions that encouraged conversation between both the researcher and the participant, this allowed the exploration of the variables that later revealed themes on the topic. Some participants asked for a copy of the questions prior to their interview which allowed them to think about how they would answer during the interview.

Some of the questions asked during the interview were as follows:

1. How do your emotions or mood affect your food choice?
2. Can you give me *an example* of a specific time someone influenced you're eating habits?
3. Family, friends or media what has the biggest impact on your food choices and why?

Apparatus used in the study included a Lenovo laptop, an apple iphone 11, Microsoft word for transcriptions and for coding the data collected from the interviews also NVivo 12 software for the development of a word cloud.

2.4: Procedure

Before the recruitment of participants by use of purposive sampling ethical approval was given by the DBS ethical committee and the researcher had the approval from their supervisor that the research questions were suitable and would pose non to minimal risk to the participant. Participants where then sent an email with the researcher introducing themselves and inviting potential participants to take part in the study (see Appendix A), this also involved an information sheet explaining what the research was about (see Appendix B).

The emails for recruitment of participants went out the first week in January and were replied to before the end of the month. The number of participants that agreed to participant was six and that was the number of interviews that took place. The interviews were conducted as follows, online via Teams the 9th of February, in person the 10th of February, online via Teams the 12th of February, in person the 16th of February, in person the 24th February, and again in person the 28th of February, all in person interviews took place in a meeting room in the participants place of work.

The participants were informed of the approximate time of 30-45 minutes for which the interview may take and the semi-structured nature of the questions that included probing questions with the aim of exploring, the impact of culture on food choices, emotional

responses associated with food consumption, and social influences that include family, friends and media on eating behaviours. It was also conveyed to participants that the interviews would be recorded and stored to protect their identity.

The interviews were transcribed using Microsoft word to which the researcher had to listen to each recording to make sure the text matched the audio, also the removal of participants names took place at his stage in order to protect their identity. When the interview concluded participants were provided with a debrief sheet (see Appendix E) and attention was brought to the numbers of the support services the sheet included should the participant feel they need to use them.

2.5: Ethics

The approval for the research to take place was given by the DBS ethics committee and returned to the researcher with SS minor changes that included some of the research questions been slightly reworded and some probing questions taken out, this was done between the researcher and supervisor. All data was stored according to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines and audio was taken from the iPhone used to record the interviews and moved to a secure laptop where it was deidentified by been stored under pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants.

The researcher obtained informed consent (see Appendix C) from participants, provided an information sheet (see Appendix B) which outlined the purpose of the study and its voluntary nature, which meant they could leave the study at any time without consequences, this was also verbally communicated to participants at the beginning of each interview which gave the participant the chance to ask questions or leave before the interview commenced. Participants were debriefed (see Appendix E) at the end of the study and support services provided. In line with the PSI code of ethics (2011), dignity and respect were shown

to all participants meaning the core principles were upheld by the researcher which were respect, competence, responsibility, and integrity.

2.6: Data analysis

The current qualitative study used the Thematic analysis six step approach by Braun and Clarke (2006). This allowed the researcher to look deep within the data and provide a data rich analysis. An inductive approach was used to identify themes from interviews that were conducted.

The beginning of the six-step approach by Braun and Clarke started with the researcher analysing the interviews by listening to the audio and then transcribing and reading the transcripts, known as familiarising, oneself with the data, this was when the initial coding process started. Using a semantic approach each interview transcript was coded while keeping in mind the research questions as per Braun and Clarke's recommendations. The findings from the data overall supported the codes and themes that were found, such as social media influences and health and lifestyle. The process involved listening to and reading data many times as this is fundamental for the researcher in becoming familiar with the data so that they have an active part in the process of coding and developing themes.

2.7: Reflexivity

A highly important part of qualitative research is reflexivity. The influence and bias of the researcher and the impact it may have on the process of the research. The researcher needed to be mindful of the experiences shared by participants as they may have had similar experiences, having an objective and subjective approach during the research process helped to reduce any personal bias and acknowledge their role when working with the data.

I myself have a relationship with food that is both good and bad, I find a lot of my conversations involve talking about food in terms of calories and food tracking apps, during the interviews I was aware of some of the challenges that came across from participants, also

the love of food from others. The social connections that people form through food sometimes without even realising is what stood out for me. I did think to myself at the end of each interview has this given the participant any food for thought, which is part of the title for the study. I found this led me to asking is there anything else you would like to add with the hope they would say the research questions got them thinking about their eating habits, and some said it did. Having the opportunity to research a topic that has a major impact on people throughout their lifespan has been a fantastic experience and something I will continue to reflect on for a very long time.

A study by Jamieson et al. (2023) around the traditional association of reflexivity with qualitative research argues that the integration of reflexivity into quantitative research would be a good way promote a more holistic approach to research and enhance the quality of findings.

Chapter 3 Results

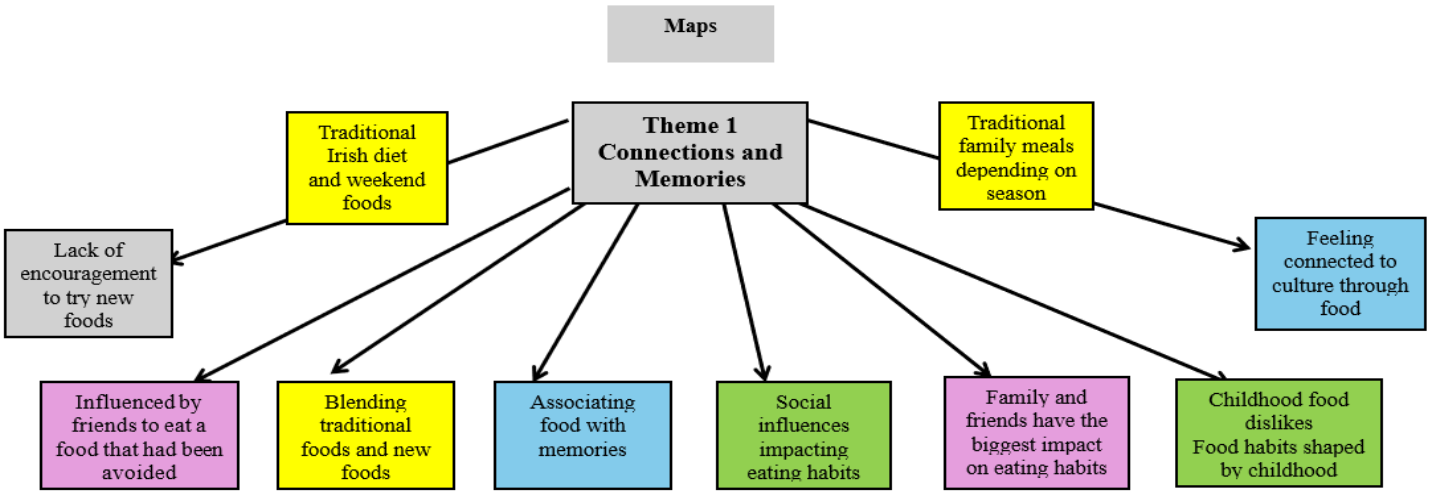
3.1: Thematic Analysis

Using the six-step thematic analysis approach as per Braun & Clarke the interviews from six participants was analysed. Participants were three females and three males and aged between eighteen and fifty-two years. This gave the researcher a broad range of gender and age within the general population. The analysis was as followed

1. Transcribing of the interviews was done using word with each participants transcription on a separate word document, this was followed by the reading of the transcripts by the researcher.
2. The transcripts were then copied to a new word document to get ready for initial coding. Each transcript was coded by the participant quotes been highlighted with the code beside each quote. There was a total of 261 codes at the end of this stage.
3. The next step was putting all the codes together onto another word document, this involved putting the codes assigned to each participant into a table and colour coding each one. For example, participant one was yellow. Then the process of generating themes began.
4. A total of thirteen themes developed from the analysis, after further analysis and relevance to the research questions 5 main themes were generated. The themes are as follows, Connections & Memories, Challenges & Motivation, Social Media Influences, Health & Lifestyle and Routine & Structure. Each theme had ten codes such as, traditional family meals depending on season, feeling of instant gratification followed by regret, use of social media as a support, convenience before health and planning meals around schedule.

5. The next stage was to define the themes, this is where each theme comes to fruition and the researcher can see a clear picture for the results. According to (Braun & Clarke, 2006) this is an important part of the research.
6. The final stage is when the findings are developed into maps, the results, where the researcher shows what has been found.

Figure 1



3.2 Theme 1: Connections and Memories

This theme demonstrates the deep connection participants felt with personal, social and cultural experiences. A sense of belonging can be reinforced when eating traditional meals.

"*I suppose in a way it was successful for having like a cultural connection to food"* (Participant D).

Food can also carry emotional connections that are linked to experiences in the past, these can be positive or negative for shaping eating patterns.

"I always had a thing about potatoes and peas and it's still a running joke to this day in it because I still have to force myself to eat peas"

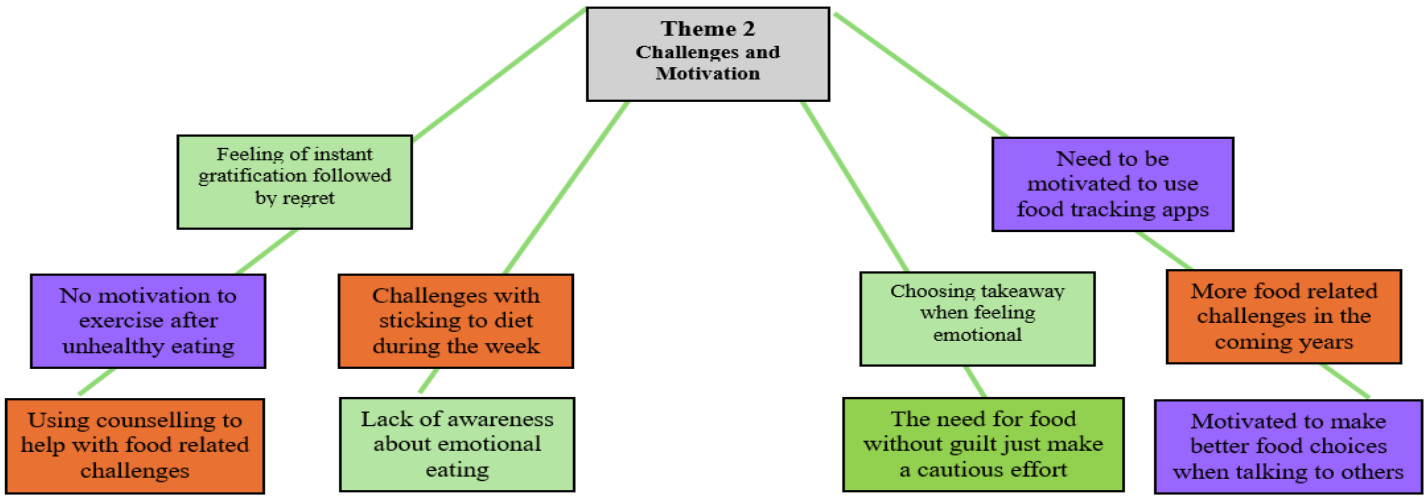
Participant A had a negative experience when thinking back.

It also shows how family and friends can influence eating habits and how the exposure to new foods can affect food diversity.

"*The traditional Irish that mam makes and then you've got your Chinese take away that you like as well"* (Participant A).

The connection with family and friends was demonstrated during the interviews and the memories that were made during those connections. Although exposure to new foods may affect food diversity. This theme shows how food is powerful in allowing interactions that can develop an individual's relationship with food throughout their life.

Figure 2



3.3 Theme 2: Challenges and Motivation

The theme Challenges and Motivation shows the complex relationship between the emotions, motivation and food choices. Key factors highlighted within the codes show how eating habits are influenced and the struggles that participants contend with to maintain a balanced diet, often influenced by emotional triggers and immediate gratification.

For example, Participant D expressed awareness of their emotional eat habits, in particular the cycle of impulse, consumption and regret.

"*With the takeaway, it's almost instant gratification of, like, oh, I just like, I really want it, you get it, you're all excited, and then after you finish it, you're just like, that wasn't worth it"*

Despite this awareness, Participant D acknowledged that low motivation often prevented them from making healthier food choices. This is a common challenge even when people recognise unhealthy eating behaviours eating habits.

Participant C linked unhealthy eating habits to reduced motivation for exercise,

"*If you're eating bad then the gym then gets kind of thrown off*"

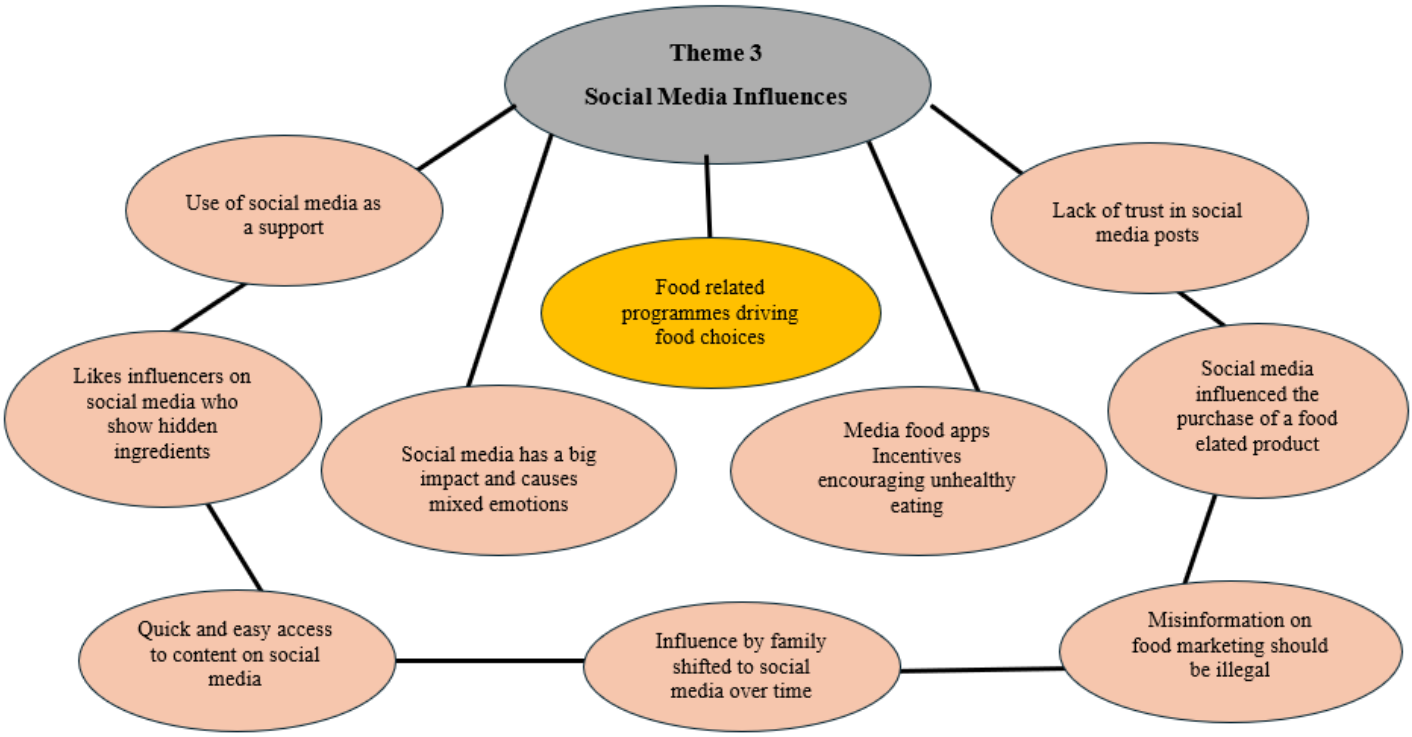
This suggests the lack of motivation to exercise after eating unhealthy food for a long period of time can be conditional, meaning when there is a lapse in one area it can affect the other.

Participant E raised concerns about the increasing difficulty of maintaining a healthy diet in Ireland, pointing to the widespread availability unhealthy food options.

"*I think it's gone too far at the moment and give it another 20 or 30 years and we're in big trouble"*.

The highlight of this theme is the challenges people face when trying to maintain healthy eating habits. Barriers are created through emotional eating and lack of motivation while social motivation and counselling can help people overcome these barriers along with the importance of awareness.

Figure 3



3.4 Theme 3: Social Media Influences

This theme demonstrated how social media can influence eating behaviours, during the interviews it was established that different participants were influenced by different factors. It was shown how it can impact food decisions while also used as a support tool,

"I actually don't avail of any supports. I kind of just go back and forth with myself other than social media. So, social media, if I want to try and get out of bad habits" (Participants B).

During the interviews it was clear that the younger participants food habits was influenced by what was cooked at home, however this changed over time to social media as they got older,

"*When you get a bit older and you're like oh I want to start eating well. That's when you kinda of go and start to venture out on your own and you start going and looking at media. And then that's where the shift happened for me*"' (Participant F).

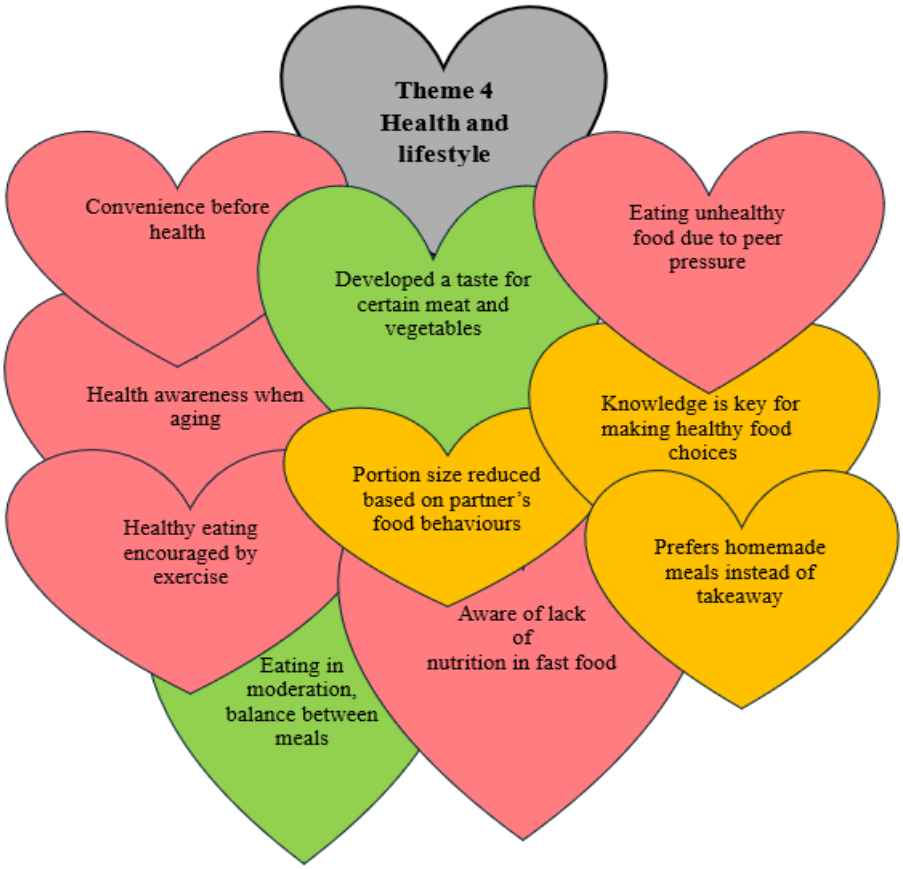
Also highlighted in this theme is the lack of trust and presence of misinformation and the promotion of unhealthy food on social media. This is what participant E said

"*I think social media really and media in general, is a terrible thing. And I think that they can brainwash people into buying bad foods. And I nearly think it's so bad that they should be prosecuted"*

Participant E felt strongly about how misinformation should be illegal because of the amount of people who fall for what is promoted by social media influencers. This emphasises the need for critical evaluation of food related content shared on social media.

Overall, the nature of social media in influencing food choices is highlighted, although it does offer support, nutritional information and the fast access to this information it also has its challenges with misinformation and unhealthy food promotion.

Figure 4



3.5 Theme 4: Health and Lifestyle

This theme came from participants own view of their health and lifestyle, some of the key factors that came across was the awareness of the lack of nutrition in fast food and choosing convenience before health. However, knowledge about nutrition can empower people to make healthier choices, this was evident when interviewing participant E.

"*I'd rather go up to Supervalu or whatever and get myself some salmon or something and make that with a few potatoes and cabbage or something"* (Participant E).

During the interview with participant B, it was demonstrated that having a balance between meals, eating in moderation was a way that encouraged healthy eating habits in this participant.

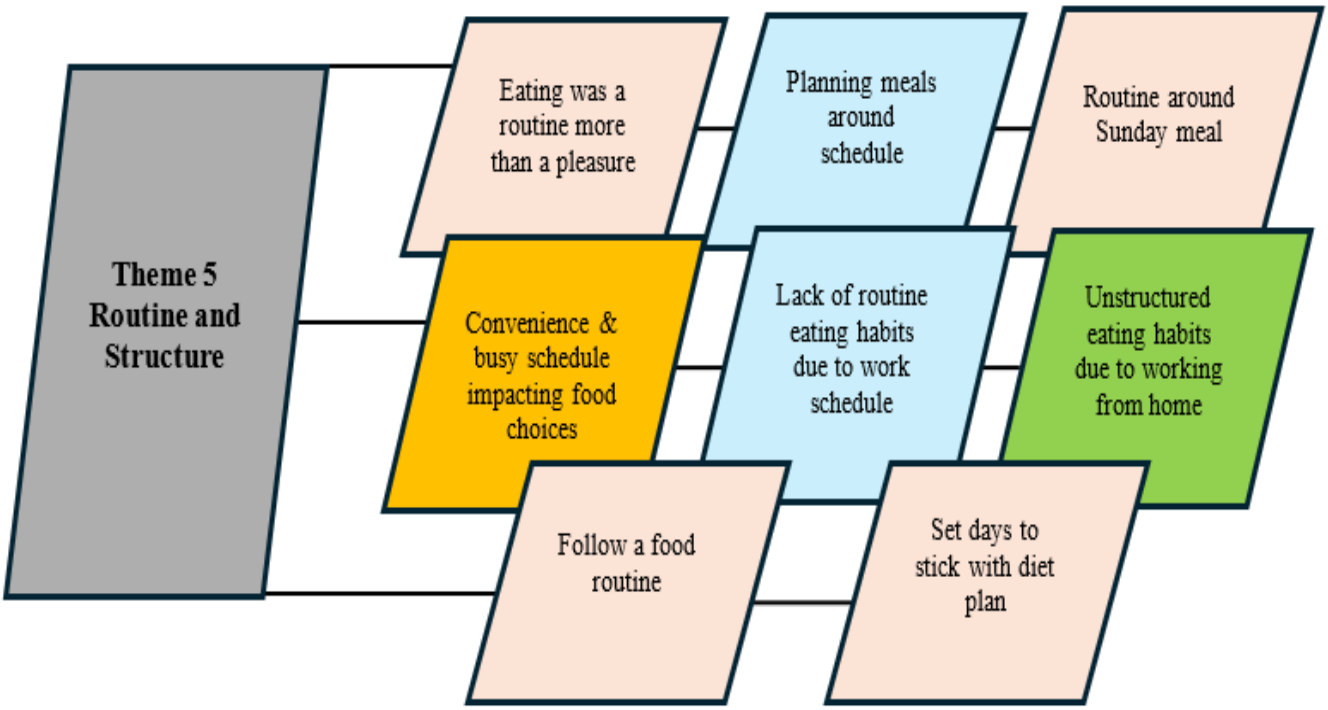
"*You're allowed to eat but obviously once it's in moderation, so it's good to have that balance of both, so I do find when I'm coming home from work and going straight into cooking, I can go into the habit, but it's also nice to go out, but I have that balance of the food options"* (Participant B).

"I didn't realise how bad certain foods where and how much like they just actually aren't doing anything good for you until I started like getting educated about it and going to the gym and now I'm like. It's not even about looking a certain way. It's just learning to eat good foods that are actually made to be good for your body" (Participant E).

It seems that there is a strong connection between health and lifestyle on healthy eating habits along with physical exercise which may also empower healthier choices.

The ongoing struggle with convenience food is highlighted in this theme but also the desire for a healthier lifestyle. Findings emphasis how knowledge in maintaining a balanced diet is important

Figure 5



3.6 Theme 5: Routine and Structure

This last theme illustrates how planning mealtimes around daily schedules and having a work life balance can improve dietary control and help overcome challenges that may arise when life gets busy. While interviewing participant A it came to light that there was no enjoyment when cooking and eating was just a routine**,**

"*I never really got an idea of, you know, loving cooking or loving lots of different foods. I think it became the dinner was kind of like just a normal part of the day"* (Participant A).

As a busy lifestyle can lead to convenience based foods it may be difficult to maintain a routine eating pattern, this may be evident in people with hectic work schedules, participant D stated

"*I might not have breakfast. I might not have lunch, and then I'll finally have something to eat at about 3 o clock or so".*

To help reinforce structure into mealtimes it may be helpful to set a routine meal such as a traditional Sunday dinner, looking back to theme 1 Connections and Memories one of the codes was traditional family meals depending on season, this could be having a routine that every holiday within each season you get together with family and have a meal, for instance in December which is winter we have Christmas and some families have dinner together every year, this not only create memories it gives structure to a person's eating habits at a joyful but busy time of the year.

The role of routine and structure in shaping eating habits is crucial as highlighted in this theme. However, while some participants struggled with dietary routines because of work related challenges, others were successful in incorporating structure into their daily routine. The findings highlight the importance of structured eating habits to help maintain a healthy diet as part of a daily routine.

Figure 6: Word Cloud

Chapter 4: Discussion

The aim of the current study was to explore the factors that influence people's eating habits, with a focus on how routine, social media, motivation, personal experiences and health awareness impact dietary decisions. Using thematic analysis, the study aimed to identify the structural, emotional, and social factors impacting eating habits as well as the challenges people have in maintaining a balanced diet. The findings advance knowledge of connections to food, external influences, and lifestyle choices, impact long term dietary habits and also offer potential direction for formulating public health policies and strategies.

4.1: Findings

The findings of this study provide understanding into the various aspects that affect eating habits. Through thematic analysis five main themes developed, they include Connections and Memories, Challenges and Motivation, Social Media Influences, Health and Lifestyle, and lastly Routine and Structure. These themes emphasise the complexities of food choices as stated above.

The findings for theme one Connections and Memories indicate that food is deeply entwined with family, personal and cultural connections, reinforcing feelings of belonging and nostalgia. Participants associated specific foods with childhood memories and family traditions which influenced their long term eating habits. However, while negative experiences such as food aversions influenced dietary choices into adulthood, this theme also overlaps with theme five Routine and Structure because of the positive experiences such as traditional family meals participants associated with encouragement and routine. These findings align with previous research highlighting how early exposure to specific foods and mealtime experiences can impact the dietary behaviours of individuals over a long period of time (De Cosmi et al., 2017).

For theme two Challenges and Motivation the findings showed the struggle between short term satisfaction and long term health as a significant barrier to eating a balanced diet. Participants reported the feeling of gratification followed by regret after consuming unhealthy foods, in particular takeaway foods. In addition and aligning with previous research by (Craven & Fekete, 2019), participants reported that unhealthy eating habits resulted in them having low energy levels and no desire to exercise leaving them in a vicious circle of increased unhealthy eating habits and decreased motivation to make healthy lifestyle choices.

The findings in relation to theme three Social Media Influences show that while some participants expressed concern about misinformation around food related content with the key concern been the role of influencers and targeted promotions of unhealthy foods as suggested by previous research (Cairns, 2019), others used it for meal ideas and self motivation. One participant even made a comment that social media platforms should be the target of legal proceedings for the spread of misinformation. The results are consistent with previous research showing concerns about unrealistic portrayals of diets and body image through misinformation (Malloy et al., 2024). What was also found was the shaping of food behaviours by social media among young people which aligns with previous research by (Goodyear et al., 2021).

More findings within theme four named Health and Lifestyle found that nutrition knowledge and awareness were key factors for shaping healthier eating habits. Participants with such knowledge and awareness which they had gained from going to the gym made more informed meal choices. However, a significant factor was convenience, as previous research suggests modern dietary trends often focus more on convenience than on health benefits, findings show participants acknowledging that even though they were aware of the advantages of healthy eating, they still chose convenience over health (García-Dorado et al., 2019). One participant emphasised the balance between the two and eating in moderation

helped encourage healthy eating, aligning with previous research integrating strategies such as self-regulation and goal setting with broader systemic approaches is important (De Ridder et al., 2017).

Lastly the findings for theme five Routine and Structure also found that while unstructured eating patterns were frequently caused by lack of routine, structured eating patterns help to improve dietary control. This aligns with previous research were a routine reaction to emotional motivations instead of an indication of hunger is formed leading to unhealthy patterns from emotional eating (González et al., 2022). Participants with hectic work schedules often skipped meals which resulted in overindulgence later in the day. Conversely, participants who used meal planning techniques such as preparing food in advance or maintaining mealtime schedules reported more control over their nutrition. These results are consistent with previous research were dietary habits such as, meal structure, portion size and food related traditions may be affected by cultural influences (Sproesser et al., 2022).

4.2: Strengths

This study was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step thematic analysis approach, which is a strength because of its structured method when analysing the data. The reliability of the findings was possible due to participant experiences been explored in great detail. Another strength is the diversity of participants which included three males and three females aging between 18 and 52 years, this allowed for a richer insight of the cultural backgrounds that influence eating habits, the theme connections and memories was one of the themes that highlighted this through the role of cultural reinforcing a sense of belonging through food. To further strengthen the study was the finding of food tracking apps and other media sources used by participants to monitor eating habits and make healthier choices, showing how modern technology can influence eating behaviours. The study is also

strengthened by the highlighting of barriers to healthy eating through themes such as Challenges and Motivation, and Social Media Influences which are relevant for the development of interventions.

4.3: Limitations

Although a strength the number of participants can also be noted as a limitation of this study because with only six participants the study cannot be generalised to the broader population as it would if the study was conducted in a quantitative manner. Another limitation is ethnicity of participants, all participants were from Ireland leaving a gap in the research for the replication across different cultures. Some interviews took place online and while this may be good for reaching a wider audience it also has its limitations such as, technical issues for both researcher and participant and the lack of rapport that would be seen in face to face interviews.

4.4: Future Research

To improve generalisability, future research could build on the results of the current study by using a larger sample size. Since cultural background was a significant factor in shaping dietary habits more research should examine the how specific cultural groups navigate the challenges related to nutrition, in particular multicultural societies. Furthermore, a mixed methods approach that incorporates both qualitative interviews and quantitative data such as food shopping patterns or diet tracking may offer deeper knowledge of how technology is used by people to control their diet. It would also be beneficial to examine the long term effects of food tracking on social media platforms that use algorithm food suggestions. Moreover, combining nutrition, psychology and digital health could provide insight into how motivation, and developing routine interact with food choices due to the psychological and emotional factors that are associated with eating habits.

4.5: Applications

The results of the current study have important significance for public health policies, social interventions and individual behavioural strategies aimed at promoting healthy eating habits. By exploring the ways in which social, psychological, emotional, and cultural factors impact eating habits this research contributes to multiple areas.

More beneficial nutrition policies and public health campaigns can be developed by taking into account the complex interactions between social and cultural factors that influence dietary choices. Policymakers can employ these insights to create culturally sensitive dietary guidelines that resonate with diverse populations to promote scientific strategies are socially and culturally relevant.

A better understanding of the emotional and psychological factors influencing dietary choices can be valuable for educational settings, workplaces, and community organisations. Communities may develop healthier eating environments that support well-being across many demographics through programs such as nutrition education within the school setting.

The study emphasises the dual influence of digital platforms on eating habits in a time when social media significantly shapes public perceptions of food, diet and body image. The results may guide the development of digital literacy campaigns and activities for responsible social media use by highlighting both the positives and negative of social media. Encouraging evidence based dietary information that may help combat misinformation.

By addressing these applications, this study provides useful opportunities for enhancing public health outcomes and advance a more thorough understanding of how dietary choices are influenced.

4.6: Conclusion

Through thematic analysis this study provides insight into many aspects that affect eating habits. The development of the five themes highlights the complexities of food choices. Finding how deep food is connected to many aspects of a person's life and the memories that are made around food, particularly through family traditions. However, it also showed the struggles individuals have with food, such as taste aversion and regret. Social media was also a major factor for individuals when it came to influenced eating habits and misinformation, with previous research showing concerns for unrealistic representations of body image (Malloy et al., 2024). Positively though the findings show that there is awareness and an interest for making healthier food choices. The study demonstrates how interacting nutrition, psychology, routine, motivation and digital health may provide good insight as to how eating habits relate to psychological and emotional factors and further enhance public health policies.

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Appendices

Appendix A-Introduction Email

Dear [name]

I hope this email finds you well.

My name is Michelle Lucas, and I am an undergraduate student at Business School (DBS) studying a BA (Hons) in Psychology. Part of my research project involves conducting a qualitative study that explores attitudes and behaviours towards food in the general public.

The purpose of the study is to enhance understanding on how factors such as cultural backgrounds, emotions, psychological factors, and social influences impact eating habits and food related decisions.

I am emailing to invite you as a participant in this study that would involve semi structured interviews lasting approx,30-45 minutes. Fundamentally, you are not obligated to take part and if you do you can leave the study at any time without consequences. Responses will be anonymised, and information will be kept confidential.

To participate you must be:

- 18 years and over
- Willing to give consent to participate

If you are interested in taking part in the study, please reply to this email and I will provide you with an information sheet and consent form. Interviews can be at your convenience and held in person or online via zoom.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require further information. Your participation would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you for your time in considering this invitation and I look forward to hearing from you.

Kindest regards

Michelle Lucas
BA (Hons) psychology
Dublin business School (DBS)
[redacted]

Appendix B-Information Sheet

Qualitative studies Information sheet

"Food for Thought" Attitudes and Behaviours Towards Food Choices Through Culture, Emotions and Social Influence

My name is Michelle Lucas, I am conducting research in the Department of Psychology that explores attitudes and behaviours toward food in the general public. This research will be conducted and submitted for examination as part of my studies.

You are invited to participate in a research study that will form the basis for the data that will be used in a final year thesis project. Please read the following information before deciding whether to participate.

What are the objectives of the study? The nature of this study requires participants to consent to an audio recorded interview that will last approx. 30-45 minutes. The participant and the interviewer will only be present, it will be conducted in a private location or online to suit the participant. Semi structured questions will be asked that are related to the theme which will be followed by analysing the data as part of the interviewer's undergraduate thesis on attitudes and behaviours toward food in the general public.

Why have I been asked to participate? You have been asked to participant because you are in research category A. I would like to collect information from people regarding attitudes and behaviours towards food. To participate you must:

- Give your consent
- Must over 18 years of age
- Be available for interview

What does participation involve? You are invited to take part in this study and participation involves answering semi structured questions in an interview taking about 30-45 minutes related to the topic. This will involve the use of a recording device. While the questions may cause some minor negative feelings, there is no known risk to participants. If any of the questions do raise difficult feelings for you, contact information for support services are included on the final page. Participation is completely voluntary and so you are not obliged to take part.

Right to withdraw Participants have the right to withdraw from the research and can refuse to answer any questions at any time for whatever reason. Participants may also ask for their data to be removed at any stage. Withdrawing from the study will have no consequences at all. As the researcher I will describe what the study is about and go through the information sheet you will be given. To confirm you agree to take part in the study l will ask you to sign a consent form.

Are there any benefits from my participation? While there will be no direct benefit from participation studies like this can make an important contribution to our understanding of this topic. There will not be any financial or other reward for participation. However, the findings from this study will be used in the researcher's thesis and poster and may be presented at national and international conferences and will be submitted for publication in peer-reviewed journals. Interim and final reports will be prepared

Are there any risks involved in participation? There are no known risks associated with participation. However, if any of the questions do raise difficult feelings, you can stop at any time. Any inconvenience involved in taking part will be limited. Also, contact information for support services are included at the end of this information sheet. Any questions prior to participation can be asked following the review of this sheet. A debrief stage will be available at the end. Participation is completely voluntary and so you are not obliged to take part. If you have any questions, you can email me at [redacted]

Confidentiality All information collected as part of the study, will solely be used for writing the thesis and the academic poster that will be presented by the researcher at Dublin Business School (DBS). Any quotes will be presented anonymously and will not identify you. The data from the interviews will be stored on a password protected computer. They will be stored safely and will not be publicly displayed or published without prior consent. Data collected is stored in the EU, for five years, and no participants will be identified in the thesis or academic poster. This research has been ethically approved by the DBS College Human Research Ethics Committee.

Contact Details
Should you require any further information about the research, please contact Michelle Lucas by email at [redacted] My supervisor can be contacted at [redacted]
Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

Thank you in advance for taking participating.

Appendix C-Consent Form

"Food for Thought" Attitudes and Behaviours Towards Food Choices Through Culture, Emotions and Social Influence

I have read and understood the attached Information Sheet regarding this study.
Yes / No

I have had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study with the researcher and I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions.
Yes / No

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences
Yes / No

I understand that a recording device will be used to record the interview.
Yes / No

I agree to take part in the study, and that the quotes from my interview be used in the thesis/poster with my identity unknown.
Yes / No

I agree to have my data relating to this study to be stored confidentially as described in the Information Sheet.
Yes / No

I consent to participating in the study.
Yes / No

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Participant's Name in print: _____

Appendix D-Interview Schedule

Interview Questions

Participant ID: _____ Interviewer: _____

Date: _____

Introduction (3 minutes)	Thank you for agreeing to talk with me. My name is Michelle Lucas. I am a student in the BA (Hons) Psychology in Dublin Business School. I am currently undertaking a research study entitled, Exploring Attitudes and Behaviours towards Food in the General Public. I am speaking with you today so that we can get a better understanding of •The impact of culture on food choices •Emotional responses associated with food consumption •Social influences that include family, friends and media on eating behaviours Your answers will be treated as confidential. We will not include your names or any other information that could identify you in any reports we write. We will destroy the notes and audiotapes after we complete our study and publish the results in line with DBS policies. This interview is expected to last for approximately 30-45 minutes Do you have any questions? Complete consent form **Start recording from here.**
Topic 1 (15 minutes)	***Topic #1: C***ultural Backgrounds and Food Choices

	1. Can you tell me how your cultural background influences your food choices? Can you give me *an example*? 2. How did that make you feel about certain foods? 3. Is that something you felt was successful/unsuccessful in making food choices? 4. Can you tell me more about how your cultural background influences you're eating habits? 5. Do you think your food choices would be different without cultural influences?
Topic 2 (15 minutes)	***Topic #2:*** Emotional and Psychological influences on Eating Habits 6. How do your emotions or mood affect your food choice? Can you give me *an example*? Was it *helpful or not for your well-being*? Was it *hard for you to choose healthier foods*? *Do you avail of other supports* to manage your emotional eating behaviours?
Topic 3 (8 minutes)	***Topic #3:*** Social Influences on Eating Behaviours 7. How do family, friends or media influence your food choices? Can you give me *an example* of a specific time someone influenced you're eating habits? *Family, friends or media what has the biggest impact* on your food choices and why? Helps you make *better food choices, or* does it create *challenges*?
Final thoughts (5 minutes)	8. Have you anything else to add? Thank you for your time. ***Stop tape and debrief***

Appendix E-Debrief Sheet

Debrief Sheet

Thank you for participating!

Thank you for participating in the study. The research looked at Exploring Attitudes and Behaviours towards Food in the General Public. and the areas of interest related to it such as the impact of culture on food choices, Emotional responses associated with food consumption and social influences that include family, friends and media on eating. All data collected will only be used for the purpose of the study and you as the participant will not be identified as the use of pseudonyms will protect your identity. There were no deceptions used at any stage while conducting this study.

Now that you have been fully informed of the true nature and purpose of the study, including all study procedures and research goals, we would like your permission to keep your data for research purposes. You are free with withdraw your data and not let us use it in our study analysis.

Researcher name: Michelle Lucas

If you need to contact me with any question regarding this study, please do so by emailing [redacted]

If you feel that answering any of the questions has raised some issues for you, please consider contacting some of the support services listed below, or speak to a friend, family member or professional.

Aware:
The Aware Support Line 1890 303 302
Available Monday – Sunday, 10am to 10pm.
Email for support at: supportmail@aware.ie

Samaritans
Call on: 116 123
Available 24hrs a day, 365 days a year. Free to call.
Email: jo@samaritans.org

I have read this debriefing form, and I agree to allow the use of my data for research purposes
Please indicate if you give permission for the use of your research data
You may keep my audio recordings for research purposes; yes/no
You may keep my interview responses for research purposes; yes/no

_____

Name (print)

_____

Signature