

THE SOCIAL INFLUENCE ON MALADAPTIVE BEHAVIOR

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Introduction

The food market is a very large industry, so large that it captures 12.5 percent of consumer income (Gallo, 1999). According to the United States Census Bureau, there are currently approximately 7 billion people in the world. Seven billion people who need food to survive and 7 billion people who will make repeat purchases on food each day. The food industry does not discriminate against consumers; rather it reaches every single group of consumers (women, men, Asians, Hispanics, Christians, Muslims, etc.) since it is a necessity for existence. Expectedly, there is intense competition within this industry and vast opportunities for firms to gain market share. Food is one of the most highly branded items in the American economy, thus lending itself to major advertising. Food purchases are no longer seen as transactional exchanges- consumers are developing relationships with food firms that produce products that fit into their lifestyle choices. Food companies are recognizing this change and adapting a new way of marketing and advertising.

The shift in the food industry, while beneficial to firms, may be negatively affecting the way consumers make decisions related to their health. For instance, the constant influx of advertising of food products may be influencing consumers to overindulge. In contrast, those health concerned food and dietary product firms may influence consumers to be overly worried with their weight, enabling them to develop unhealthy eating patterns.

The negative, dark side of the food industry is affecting consumer health in a physical, emotional, and social way. More than one-third, or 78.6 million of U.S. adults are obese (“Adult

Obesity Facts”, 2014). Those 80 million adults face obesity related conditions such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and certain types of cancer, which are some of the leading causes of preventable death. Thus, medical costs are significantly higher for people who are obese than those of normal weight, approximately \$1,500 higher. An equal number of people are affected by eating disorders in the U.S. Up to 24 million people of all ages and genders suffer from an eating disorder, anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating disorder (“Eating Disorders 101 Guide: A Summary of Issues, Statistics and Resources”, 2003). The diet and diet related industry that is influencing this population is a 50 billion dollar a year enterprise (Garner, 1991). Consumers are vulnerable to developing unhealthy eating habits, whether overeating or under eating, on a daily basis and in many ways with industry’s that large and profitable in existence. Only 39.3% of males and 45.9% of females in the U.S. maintain a healthy weight (“Healthy Weight, Overweight, and Obesity Among U.S. Adults, 2003) There are more unhealthy adults in the U.S. than there are healthy.

The negative side of the food industry is also affecting consumers in an emotional and social way. According to Sarah Grogan with the *Journal of Health Psychology*, “body image” relates to a person’s perceptions, feelings, and thoughts about his or her body, and is usually conceptualized as incorporating body size estimation, evaluation of body attractiveness and emotions associated with body shape and size. Unfortunately this term has developed into a major preoccupation. A study at Brown University revealed that 74.4% of normal-weight women think about their weight or appearance “all the time” or “frequently”. Similarly, 46% of normal-weight men surveyed responded the same way (“Body Image”). Unhealthy body image is an emotional and social aspect of the dark side of the food industry.

Food firm's intentions are not to negatively impact the health of their consumers; therefore, at what point does the influx of marketing cause a shift in consumer [behaviors](#)? What causes a shift from a healthy level of concern for one's [eating](#) to an unhealthy concern [or behavior](#), [and](#) ultimately the development of a maladaptive [consumption](#) behavior?

There are a variety of influences on consumer's health habits. For instance, family and friend's health habits can be influential causing people to eat more fast food, become a vegetarian, or start working out. Eating out has become more prevalent in recent years and developed into a social experience. The average American adult buys a meal or snack from a restaurant 5.8 times a week ("Fostering Healthier Choices"). Birthday parties, work events, and dinner with friends calls for eating out and potentially making poor health decisions more often. Likewise, there are social influences on the way people exercise. Today there are running groups, online workout communities, and boutique gym studios that foster intimate relationships. These unique communities allow people to engage socially in their workout experience. Technology is also fostering the social influence on health habits. Social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are allowing people to share their own personal experiences to a large audience. For example, people can take pictures of the healthy dinner they cooked at home, post it on Instagram, and receive a variety of "likes" and comments from their followers. In addition to these social media sites, other applications are connecting people in their healthy lifestyle journey. My Fitness Pal is an application on Apple devices that allows users to log their workouts, meals for the day, and current weight. Similarly to social media sites, people can like and comment on changes on user's profiles. There are several other applications that have unique features, which change the healthy lifestyle journey into a social experience. Social influences

come from many different sources and change consumer's health habits in negative and positive manners.

This research attempts to provide insight into social influences, specifically social media sites, on health decisions. Likewise, it studies the point at which consumers develop a maladaptive behavior related to their health and if this point is influenced by such social influences. In the following section I will discuss the theoretical concept of addiction and maladaptive consumption, following I will present findings from two focus groups examining the social influences and social media effects on healthy/unhealthy eating.

Theoretical Background

Addiction is a prevalent issue, affecting more than two-thirds of American families (Davis). Addiction is clearly defined as “a chronic brain disease that causes compulsive substance use despite harmful consequences” (“Addiction”, 2015). Before individuals develop an addiction however, they progress through a continuum of consumption behavior: non-use, non-addictive use, near addictive, then addiction (Martin et al., 2012). (See Appendix A) Within that continuum, during the near addictive phase people are triggered to move from an adaptive consumption behavior to maladaptive consumption behavior- an inflection point.

“Recent research indicates that certain types of food may trigger psychological and neurological processes similar to those associated with drug and alcohol addiction” (DePierre, Luedicke, Puhl, 2013). Therefore, individuals who experience food addiction, either overeating or under eating, progress through the “Process Continuum of Consumption Behavior” and partake in near addictive, maladaptive behaviors prior to the inflection point which leads them to addiction.

The inflection point, or “tipping point”, is suggested to be influenced by four factors: motivational factors, cognitive load, individual characteristics, and social triggers. Motivation factors include one’s goals and aspirations. Cognitive load encompasses things such as distractions and multi-tasking. Self worth, risk tasking, need for control, compulsivity, and reactance are some examples of what is considered individual characteristics. Lastly, social triggers include situational variables, people including co-workers and family, and attention to others (Martin et al., 2012). Those social triggers could also encompass the interaction with people over social media sites, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc. While this framework and marketing literature suggest social influence and marketing will impact eating behaviors, much is yet to be explored on how social media may be used to influence eating behaviors and navigate the tipping point. Addiction is influenced and can take a behavior from adaptive to maladaptive by social triggers.

The Social Cognitive Theory supports the concept that human behavior is influenced by environmental, social factors (Bandura, 2002). Albert Bandura developed the theoretical perspective that states human behavior is determined through three factors: cognitive, behavioral, and environmental. Cognitive factors, also called “personal factors”, include knowledge, expectations, and attitudes. Behavioral factors include skills, practice, and self-efficacy. Lastly, environmental factors are social norms, access in community, and influence on others. Human behavior, such as what one chooses to eat or if they exercise or not, can be shaped by environmental factors such as friends or family or social media sites. Health related behaviors, such as healthy eating or working out, are influenced by social factors.

Methodology

In order to answer the research questions of what triggers unhealthy choices, what influences the “tipping point” which triggers consumers to develop a maladaptive, addictive behavior, and does social media play a role in such stated “tipping point”, focus groups were conducted in April 2015. We recruited students on Oklahoma State University’s campus, undergraduate and graduate students, through class announcements and posted flyers. The participants were offered a \$10 incentive and food to attend. We ran two focus groups and anticipated 10-20 participants in each. We chose this methodology due to the several benefits related to focus groups. For example, they enable a researcher to elicit opinions, attitudes, and beliefs held by members of a group and they enable a researcher to have more control than in participant observation, but less control than in face-to-face interviews (Myers, 2009). These advantages would allow us to gain qualitative data that would provide us with greater insights into human behavior. The participants recruited knew each other and were friends, therefore the social dynamic allowed greater conversation and openness in the group.

The focus group data was open coded for themes related to healthy eating, social influences, and social media effects. “Open coding involves analyzing the text and summarizing this text by the use of a succinct code. Open codes are descriptive: that is, they identify, name, and categorize phenomena found in the text” (Myers, 2009). Specifically I attempted to identify, name, and categorize phenomena related to the following research questions: [How do you perceive healthy and unhealthy habits?](#) [How do social influences effect what you choose to eat?](#) [Does social media influence your eating habits?](#)

Analysis

Healthy Eating – Fresh but So Much Effort. Based on findings from the focus groups, I was able to construct what participants considered healthy and unhealthy eating. Eating healthy can mean different things to different people, but there are several reoccurring characteristics used to describe healthy eating. As some participants stated, eating healthy means fruits and vegetables, not a lot of processed foods, and portion control. In contrast, not eating healthy is composed of fried foods, processed, artificial foods, and candy.

Another strong opinion presented itself from the focus groups, healthy eating is time consuming and difficult. As one participant said, “It takes so much time and energy to eat healthy.” Healthy eating requires more thought, preparation, and energy, thus making it more difficult for people to do at times. Another participant stated, “The last thing I want to do after a long day is to spend 30-45 minutes cooking myself dinner.” Despite knowing what is healthy and unhealthy, people still would choose the easier, and faster option of eating pre-prepared meals or eating out. What someone considers healthy versus unhealthy is shaped by several factors; therefore we then examined what social influences had shaped their eating habits.

Eat and Be Social. While we must eat food in order to have the appropriate nutrients to function, eating is largely a social activity as well. One participant offered, “(Eating) that is one of the main ways to hang out with people.” Eating brings people together provides a way to connect with someone. For instance, first dates are usually shared over dinner, families deem certain nights of the week “family dinner night”, and friends catch up over happy hour. One participant agreed, “All the bonding you do in a friendship is centered around food.” While socializing by eating can build relationships, it can also have a large personal influence on what you eat, how often you eat, and where you eat. In regards to eating unhealthy, eating out several

times a week in order to socialize may lend you to make unhealthier decisions, which as stated earlier are more processed foods, fried foods, and sweets.

In a positive aspect, social influences can help you make healthier decisions. Diet plans can be hard to maintain alone, but friends can assist in keeping on track. A participant said, “When you’re encouraged by a friend or someone you hang out with a lot to be healthy, you’re more healthy.” Accountability forces someone to take responsibility for their actions and answer to their eating choices. One participant offered an instance where social influences helped her eat healthier, “The healthiest I’ve ever eaten is when my roommate and I went of a kick of being ‘healthy’ for a week.” While social influences motivate you to not care as much about nutrition, they equally motivate you to eat healthy and be more conscious of your lifestyle habits. The people you choose to surround yourself with can shape what you view as healthy and unhealthy and they can shape what you choose to eat. Ultimately, your social influences serve as a large factor on your health: your food choices and perceptions on what is healthy and unhealthy. Another aspect of social influences is social media. Similarly, to the role social influences play on health decisions, I wanted to discover if social media impacted our daily eating habits.

Social Media – Healthy and Unhealthy Influences. Social media spans from Twitter and Facebook to Pinterest and it continues to expand to offer new sites to connect with people. Social sites offer another opportunity for social influences to impact people’s decisions to eat healthy or unhealthy. One participant stated, “By far that is the biggest motivation, social media.” That motivation can encompass cooking meals at home, not ordering dessert, or cutting out carbohydrates. Similarly, people use social media to maintain relationships, which allows them to see transformations in relation to weight loss and health. For example, a participant said, “Facebook is good too, like when you see people losing weight. They will put transformation

pictures up and you will think, that's so cool." Sites such as Facebook allow people to document their health journey and provide motivation and accountability virtually. Another useful site that several participants mentioned is Pinterest. This social media site offers things such as recipes, workout plans, and other ways to improve your health. In contrast, social media also negatively impacts health decisions.

While Pinterest offers healthy recipes and different workout plans, they also offer recipes for unhealthy desserts and images of models with perfect bodies. One participant stated, "I have just as many, if not more, unhealthy things pinned as I do healthy things." Those unhealthy recipes and their appetizing pictures influence people to make them and indulge in unhealthy food. Likewise, Pinterest is flooded with images of models that provide unrealistic expectations of what someone needs to look like. The need for a "bikini bod" as one participant put it, could initiate unhealthy eating habits to lose weight. This negative social influence via social media could have harmful effects on one's body image, physical appearance, and overall confidence. Another example of negative influences from social media is restaurants' presence on social media. For instance, a participant shared their struggle, "I follow Chick-Fil-A. They tweet things and you get drawn in and want it." More and more fast food and unhealthy restaurants are on sites such as Twitter and Instagram and they provide pictures of their unhealthy offerings, which then draw consumers in to eat there. Social media has the ability to positively and negatively influence people's eating habits and is a large factor in their overall health.

Another research question I wished to address was what causes the shift from a maladaptive behavior to addiction with regards to eating. That inflection point, or "tipping point", is suggested to be influenced by four factors: motivational factors, cognitive load, individual characteristics, and social triggers. More specifically I wanted to [explore the](#) role that

social triggers played. Participants offered several examples of instances where they recognized that their maladaptive behaviors were turning into [more excessive behavior \(moving toward addiction aspects\)](#) and something needed to change. For example, one participant said, “Being a part of a wedding and knowing those pictures would be around forever makes you want to be skinny and pretty, that kick started some of it (eating healthy).” In this instance, motivational factors, individual characteristics, and social triggers played an equal role in influencing the tipping point. Another participant shared a time when individual characteristics was the influential factor in her tipping point, “The tipping point came last fall when I had seven to eight cokes in one day and I decided to completely cut them out.” While there can be a combination of factors influencing the tipping point, it can also just require one factor. One last participant offered a personal story of what influenced her inflection point, “Looking at old pictures and remembering how confident you used to be can make you start eating healthy.” This situation presented motivation and individual characteristic factors that influenced the inflection point. Despite the large social influence on everyday health choices of whether to eat a cheeseburger or a salad, I found that social triggers play a lesser role on influencing the inflection point. Collectively, these participants were influenced by a combination of the suggested factors: motivational factors, cognitive load, individual characteristics, and social triggers.

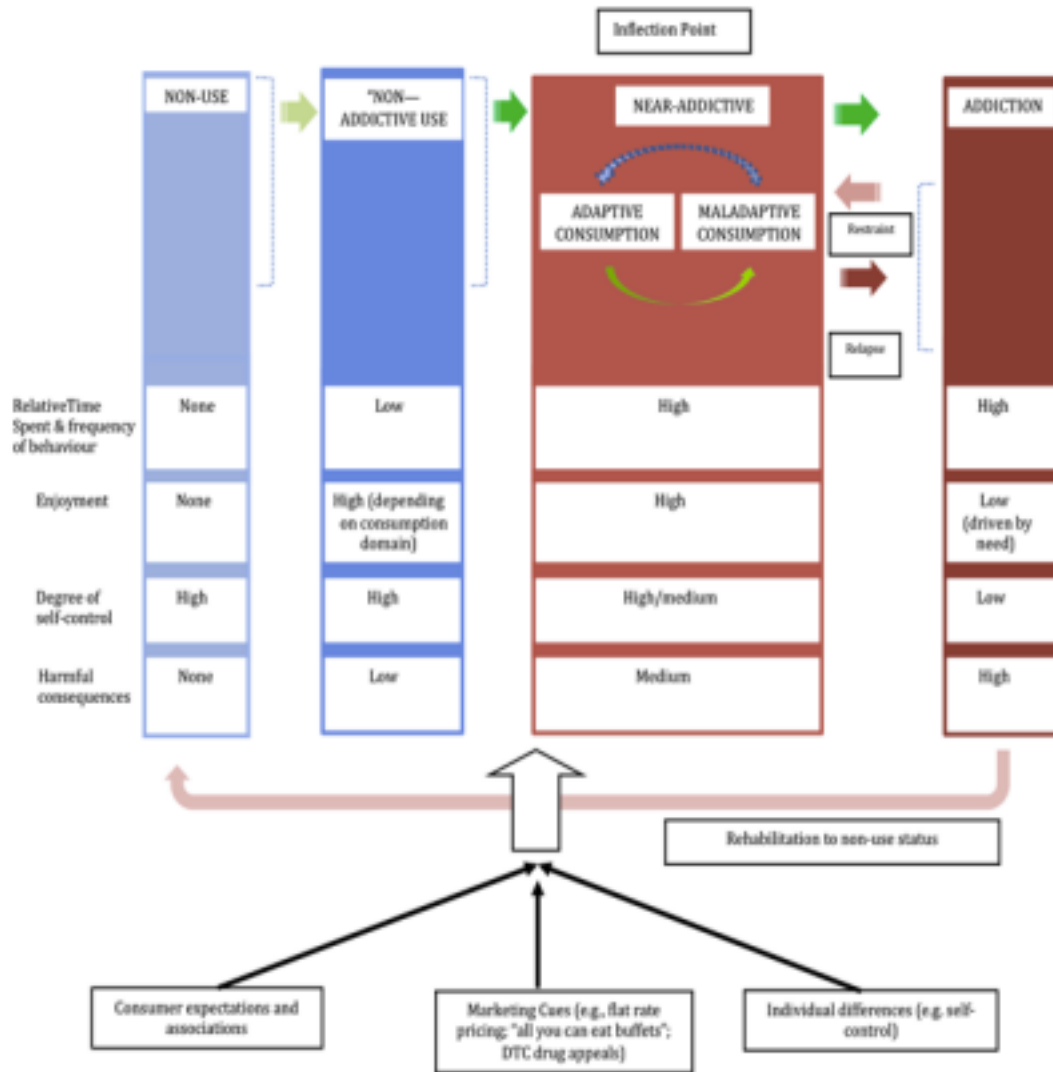
Discussion

This study provides insights into perceptions of healthy and unhealthy food, social influences and social media effects on eating habits. Findings from this study provide two understandings. First, social influences are a significant factor in one’s health, [and may influence movement \(in addition to individual characteristics\) along the](#) “Process Continuum of Consumption Behavior”, specifically the inflection point, or “tipping point.” Second, social

media has a large influence over consumers and their behaviors related to healthy and unhealthy eating. [It contributes to their perceptions of what is healthy/unhealthy, may serve as triggers for eating/dieting/working out, and serves as an ongoing account of their shifting health lifestyle and appearance.](#)

As stated earlier, the food market is a very large industry and captures 12.5 percent of consumer income (Gallo, 1999). Companies within the food market have the opportunity to gain an even larger percentage of consumer income through their marketing and advertising efforts, more specifically through their social media efforts. Firms who utilize social media to influence consumers can attract a larger number of customers, thus earning larger revenues. Similarly, companies can use their social media tools to build relationships with consumers, as food purchases are no longer seen as transactional exchanges. The food industry has the power to influence consumers' lifestyle habits and perceptions on health. [Social marketers and public health professionals should recognize both the power of social influence and social media to impact consumers health behaviors. They can use social/peer aspects in healthy eating or workout campaigns as well as encourage consumers to use social media and apps to track and improve their healthy eating behaviors.](#)

APPENDIX A



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