

An Examination of Behaviors and Attitudes toward Food Based on the Self-Reported Desire to Lose Weight: A Comparison of Two Groups in the United States and Italy

Marianne McGarry Wolf, Paola Bertolini, Traci A. Matheson, and Kylie Pringle

This research uses a survey instrument in the United States and Italy to examine the relationship between consumers' demographics, attitudes, and behaviors toward food purchasing and their self-described desire to lose weight. Approximately two-thirds of consumers in the United States and slightly over half of consumers in Italy indicated a desire to lose weight. Married consumers with children in the household in both countries are more likely to desire to lose weight. Furthermore, consumers from both countries who desire to lose weight were more likely to agree that "the main meal of the day is the most important time of the day for my household." Although the main meal of the day is more important to consumers from both countries who desire to lose weight, consumers in the United States who desire to lose weight were more likely to indicate that every member of their families eat the main meal together. Consumers in Italy who desire to lose weight were less likely to indicate that every member of their families eat the main meal together. The self-described overweight consumers in both countries enjoy cooking and have sufficient food for their families. However, the overweight consumer in the United States is often too busy to cook. This research finds no difference in the number of meals eaten away from home in a typical week between those in each country who desire to lose weight and those who do not. Furthermore, in the United States the sources of foods eaten away from home, such as fast food, are not related to the importance to the consumer of weight loss.

The proportion of consumers who are overweight and obese has been increasing in the United States since 1976. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States, less than half of adults in the United States were overweight in 1976 and approximately 14 percent were obese. These proportions have swelled with the consumers' waistlines to 65 percent of adults being overweight and 30 percent obese in 2000 (American Obesity Association 2002). The problem of overweight consumers has economic impacts on the United States economy that range from increased health care costs to increased fuel usage by aircraft. Europe is also experiencing an increase in the proportion of consumers who are overweight and obese. The International Obesity Task Force indicates that approximately one-third of people living in the European Union are overweight and ten percent are obese (International Obesity Task Force and European Association for the Study of Obesity

2002). While the level of consumers in the United States who are overweight or obese is significantly higher than that in the European Union, there is concern that the problem in Europe is on the brink of a public-health catastrophe.

Numerous factors such as increased portion size, eating away from home, lack of knowledge about nutrition, and increased consumption of processed foods have been used to explain why the proportion of overweight consumers has been increasing. This research uses quantitative marketing-research methodology to examine the attitudes and behaviors toward food of consumers in Italy and the United States who self-reported they would like to lose weight compared to those who did not indicate a desire to lose weight. Behavior concerning the purchasing of organic foods, label readership when purchasing food, eating meals with family members, and eating meals away from home are examined in this research. Attitudes toward price, quality, and safety of the food supply in own country; pesticides; locally grown food; enjoyment of cooking; and lack of time for cooking are examined. In addition, the demographics of those in each country desiring to lose weight are compared to those that do not desire to lose weight.

Wolf is professor and Matheson is undergraduate student, Department of Agribusiness, and Pringle is graduate student, Department of Food and Environmental Sciences, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. Bertolini is associate professor, Department of Economics, University of Modena e Reggio Emilia, Modena, Italy.

Research Methodology

A cross-section analysis of consumers in each country is conducted at one point in time. The research uses a survey instrument that was administered through the use of a personal interview during a six-month period in the fall of 2002 and winter of 2003 in the United States and during the winter of 2003 in Italy. The random sample of 550 food shoppers for the United States was collected in San Luis Obispo County, California. San Luis Obispo County was designated the best test market in the United States by *Demographics Daily*. San Luis Obispo was found to be the best of 3,141 counties to represent a microcosm of the United States based on 33 statistical indicators. However, American Obesity statistics indicate that California has a slightly lower than average obesity rate (American Obesity Association 2002). The random sample of 200 food shoppers in Italy was collected in Modena, Italy. Modena, in Emilia Romagna, is a rich industrial area that represents one of the most important areas of food production in Italy for both industrial food and for typical traditional foods such as parmesan cheese, Modena ham, Parma ham, and Modena vinegar. In addition, Modena is important to the food-distribution system of Italy since the largest distribution group, Coop, resides in Modena. These characteristics make Modena an important area to represent consumers' attitudes toward food in Italy, especially in Northern Italy (Bertolini 2002). Household income in this region is higher compared to the average household income level in Italy. The European Association for the Study of Obesity indicates that Italy was twelfth of the fourteen EU countries examined, with approximately 45 percent of its adults overweight (International Obesity Task Force and European Association for the Study of Obesity 2002).

Findings

Concern about Weight

The proportion of consumers in the sample from the United States who indicated a desire to lose weight, 66.5 percent, is similar to the proportion of overweight adults reported by the American Obesity Association in 2000, 64.5 percent (American Obesity Association 2002). However, the proportion of consumers in the sample from Italy who indicated

a desire to lose weight, 55 percent, is higher than the proportion of overweight adults reported by the European Association for the Study of Obesity, approximately 45 percent (International Obesity Task Force and European Association for the Study of Obesity 2002).

Food-Purchasing Behavior

Most consumers appear to be concerned with nutrition. Over half of the sample in Italy read nutrition labels, while over three-fourths of the United States sample reads nutrition labels. Thus the consumers in the United States, who are overall more likely to be overweight, also are more likely to read nutrition labels. However, within each country consumers who want to lose weight and those who do not want to lose weight are similar in nutrition-label readership.

While almost two-thirds of consumers in both countries read ingredient labels, consumers in the United States who need to lose weight are more likely to read the ingredients on labels before making a purchase. This may reflect a desire to eat food that contains ingredients that will help the goal of weight loss. It also may reflect a response to comply with the many fad diets in the United States, such as low-fat and high-protein/low-carbohydrate diets.

A majority of consumers in both countries indicate that they purchased organic food in the past year and plan to increase purchases. There was no relationship in either country between the desire to lose weight and past-year purchasing of organic foods. Most consumers in both countries do not contact a food company or government agency by phone or the Internet regarding a specific food product. However, consumers in the United States that need to lose weight are more likely to indicate that they contact a food company or government agency regarding a food product.

Meal-Eating Behavior

Restaurants and eating away from home have been the targets of consumers looking for someone to blame for their obesity problems. U.S. District Judge Robert Sweet threw out a lawsuit that blamed Happy Meals and burgers for causing obesity among kids. The judge was worried that the case could "spawn thousands of similar 'McLawsuits'" against the

nation's 870,000 restaurants. The case was specifically thrown out because the plaintiffs, including a 14-year-old girl who stands 4-foot-10 and weighs 170 pounds, were unable to show that burger buyers were unaware of the health consequences of eating too much McDonald's food. "We are hopeful this ruling will deter others from filing abusive lawsuits that further encumber our judicial system," said Steven Anderson, chief executive of the National Restaurant Association. "While restaurants continue to grow in popularity, the average American consumes 76 percent of meals at home. Healthier living can best be attained through balancing energy in and energy out, not by chastising some of America's favorite foods" (Alexander 2003).

The findings of this research agree with Anderson's statement. Consumers in the United States indicate that they eat approximately 23 percent of meals away from home. Consumers in Italy eat less than one-fifth of meals away from home. Furthermore, in both Italy and the United States eating out is not related to the desire to lose weight. However, consumers in the United States eat out approximately one more time a week than do consumers in Italy. This may reflect the higher proportion of consumers indicating they need to lose weight in the United States. More research is needed concerning this issue.

In order to further examine the relationship between eating away from home and the need to lose weight, an additional survey was administered among 192 randomly selected food shoppers in San Luis Obispo, California during the spring of 2003. The additional sample of consumers in the United States was asked to respond to how strongly they agree that it is *important* for them to lose weight, rather than how strongly they agree that they *desire* to lose weight. In addition, the consumers were asked *where* they eat their meals away from home, rather than *when* they eat their meals away from home. Fewer consumers indicate that they agree that it is *important* to lose weight (59 percent) than agree that they *want* to lose weight (67 percent). Consumers in both United States' samples eat approximately five meals away from home in a typical week. There is no relationship between the number of times consumers eat meals away from home and whether they agree that it is *important* to lose weight. Furthermore, there is no relationship between the type of foods consumers eat when

they eat away from home and the importance to the consumer that he or she loses weight. Less than one-quarter of the meals eaten away from home are eaten at fast food restaurants, and approximately one-quarter of the meals eaten away from home are meals consisting of food that was brought from home. It appears that this data is further evidence that the restaurant trade is not the sole cause of the swelling of waistlines in the United States.

Although there is no relationship between the need to lose weight and eating meals away from home, consumers in the United States that feel they need to lose weight are more likely to eat the main meal with the family very often. However, Italians who need to lose weight are less likely to eat with their family together. It appears that family values are having a positive effect on the bulging American waistline.

Attitudes toward Food

Consumers were asked to rate the desirability of nineteen specific characteristics of food to them when they make a decision to purchase food. They were asked the following question:

"The following list shows features people may look for when they purchase food. Please indicate the desirability of each feature by giving me a number from one to five. Five means the feature is extremely desirable, three means it is somewhat desirable, and one means the feature is not desirable at all to you when you purchase food. If no single answer captures your feelings completely, please circle the closest number. Please try to use all the numbers in the scale."

Analysis of the mean ratings of the interval data indicates that there are six differences in the importance of individual characteristics to consumers in the United States based on the desire to lose weight and only one difference between the consumer groups in Italy. The consumers in Italy who desire to lose weight rated "fresh tasting" less desirable than did those who do not desire to lose weight. The consumers in the United States who desire to lose weight appear to be more concerned with quality and the environment when making a food-purchase decision. They rated the following characteristics as

more desirable: high quality, free of pesticides, safe for the workman, good for the environment, grown in my local area, and organically grown.

In addition to providing ratings of specific food characteristics, respondents were asked how strongly they agree or disagree with a number of statements concerning food, government, and cooking. The following level-of-agreement scale was used to evaluate these statements: strongly agree = 4; agree = 3; disagree = 2; strongly disagree = 1.

The consumers in both countries who desire to lose weight were more likely to agree that “my family always has a sufficient amount of food,” “I am very concerned about the world food supply for all countries in the next 10 years,” and “I enjoy cooking.” In addition, the consumers in the United States who desire to lose weight were also more likely to agree that “the preservatives in foods are bad for my health,” “my family always has food of good quality,” “recent events have made me very concerned about the safety of the food I eat,” and “I am very busy and have very little time to cook meals.” Both groups of consumers in Italy disagree that price is important in the food-purchase decision. Furthermore, consumers in the United States who desire to lose weight were less likely to agree that “I trust government agencies in my country to insure food safety in the future” and “the most important factor in deciding to purchase a food product is low price.” Thus the self-described overweight consumers in both countries enjoy cooking and have sufficient food for their families. The price of food is not an important factor to these consumers. However, the overweight consumers in the United States are also too busy to cook, more concerned about the safety of their food, and less likely to trust the government to ensure its safety.

Demographics

In the United States, female consumers are more likely to indicate a desire to lose weight than are male consumers. However, gender is not related to the desire to lose weight in Italy. Age is related to the desire to lose weight in the United States, but not in Italy. Middle-aged consumers are more likely to desire to lose weight in the United States. The consumers in the United States and Italy who desire to lose weight are more likely to be married and less likely to be single or living with a partner.

In the United States and Italy, families with children under 18 living at home are more likely to agree they need to lose weight. However, education and employment are not related to the desire to lose weight in either Italy or the United States.

Summary and Implications of Findings

The proportion of consumers in the sample from the United States who indicated a desire to lose weight, 66.5 percent, is similar to the proportion of overweight adults reported by the American Obesity Association in 2000, 64.5 percent (International Obesity Task Force and European Association for the Study of Obesity 2002). However, the proportion of consumers in the sample from Italy who indicated a desire to lose weight, 55 percent, is higher than the proportion of overweight adults reported by the European Association for the Study of Obesity, approximately 45 percent (International Obesity Task Force and European Association for the Study of Obesity 2002).

Strong family values appear to have a positive impact on the prevalence of overweight consumers in both Italy and the United States. Married consumers with children in the household in both countries are more likely to desire to lose weight. Furthermore, consumers in both countries who desire to lose weight were more likely to agree that “the main meal of the day is the most important time of the day for my household.” Although the main meal of the day is more important to consumers in both countries who desire to lose weight, consumers in the United States who desire to lose weight were more likely to indicate that every member of their families eat the main meal together; while consumers in Italy who desire to lose weight were less likely to indicate that every member of their families eat the main meal together. The self-described overweight consumers in both countries enjoy cooking and have sufficient food for their families. However, the overweight consumer in the United States is often too busy to cook.

Although much media attention focuses on a possible relationship between eating away from home and obesity, this research finds no difference in the number of meals eaten away from home in a typical week between those who desire to lose weight and those who do not. Furthermore, in the United States the sources of foods eaten away from

home are not related to the importance of weight loss to the consumer. Less than one-quarter of meals eaten away from home in the United States are meals from fast food restaurants and consumers in the United States who need to lose weight eat at fast food restaurants a similar number of times as do those who do not need to lose weight. Thus although the “McLawsuits” and “super-size me” theories blaming the bulging American waistline on fast food may be entertaining, they are not supported by this research.

The total sample of consumers in the United States indicated that they eat one more meal away from home in a week than do the consumers from Italy. Since a higher proportion of Americans are overweight, this is an issue that should not be eliminated from research. Interestingly, consumers in the United States who need to lose weight indicate that they eat the main meal of the day with the entire family more often, while the Italian consumers who need to lose weight are less likely to indicate that they eat the main meal of the day with the entire family. Thus it appears that family values are increasing waistlines for the consumers in the United States

Overweight American consumers enjoy cooking and eating with their families, and the price of food is not an issue. They enjoy fresh-looking and -tasting food that is high in quality. In general, consumers who need to lose weight enjoy all aspects of food and sharing it with their families. They appear to be highly involved with food. Perhaps the rise in the celebrity of chefs and the media attention paid to chefs is directly related to the bulging waistlines

in the United States and Italy. Food is no longer a necessity but a comfort to families, and a source of personal satisfaction. Price is not an important factor in the food-purchase decision. Therefore it is unlikely that fat or snack taxes will affect the weight crisis. Education programs designed to inform families of the health implications of eating too much and of eating the wrong foods may assist in reversing the obesity epidemic in Europe and the United States.

References

- Alexander, D. 2003. “Judge Tosses Suit Blaming McDonald’s for Obesity.” *Chicago Tribune* January 23.
- American Obesity Association. 2002. “Obesity in the U.S.” AOA Fact Sheets, http://www.obesity.org/subs/fastfacts/obesity_US.shtml. Updated December 14, 2002.
- Bertolini P. And E. Giovannetti. 2002. “Il processo innovativo nell’agroalimentare: istituzioni, imprese e consumatori.” In *Rapporto sulla situazione economica e sociale della provincia di Modena- 2001*. Associazione Del Monte e Università Modena e Reggio Emilia.
- International Obesity Task Force and European Association for the Study of Obesity. 2002. “Obesity in Europe A Case for Action.” London: European Association for the Study of Obesity. <http://www.ietf.org/media/euobesity.pdf>.
- Jackoway, R. 2001. “When the U.S. Looks in the Mirror, it Sees SLO County,” *The Tribune* February 3.