

Introduction and Need for Research

Need for the Study

Communication is both an art and a science. When it comes to delivering a message, humans have historically relied on linear models of communication—meaning the *source*, or communicator, created a message and then selected the medium (newspaper, TV, etc.) that carried it to the *receiver* (the consumer) (Saylor Academy, 2012). Now, the progression of messaging has become so busy that audiences are receiving communication from seemingly every direction, and they demand a more catered approach. Every audience is different, and it is crucial for communicators to use intentional approaches in order to appeal to the desired audience. In the niche of agricultural communications, numerous reports and analyses have verified that effective communication is vital in every sector of agriculture-related activity (Zumalt, 2008).

Generally, food is marketed based on demographic characteristics of targeted consumers (Perner, n.d.). Businesses use consumer insights to better understand the prospective market and use advertising personalization to ensure the needs of the targeted group are fulfilled (Mialki, 2020). However, companies now face more competition than ever to be seen by consumers. Experts estimated that most Americans are exposed to around 4,000 to 10,000 advertisements each day (Marshall, 2015). So, as consumers become more and more challenging to reach, it becomes more crucial to be effective in communicating to them (Galloway, 2017). While there is a level of effectiveness in using demographics to develop messaging, there is still a high level of assumptions being made about the consumers (Quick, 2017). Such assumptions, if they are inaccurate, can cause communicators to miss their intended audience.

The region popularly designated “the Bible Belt” consists of almost the entire Southeastern United States, from Virginia down to northern Florida and west to parts of Texas, Oklahoma, and Missouri (Abadi & Gal, 2018). In this region, society and politics are heavily influenced by Evangelicalism, a distinctive form of Christianity begun as an eighteenth-century Protestant revival movement stressing the need for transformative conversion (Bebbington, 1989). One of the primary “marks” of Evangelicalism is its “biblicism,” defined by the historian David Bebbington as “a particular regard for the Bible,” which includes the “belief that all spiritual truth is to be found in its pages” (Bebbington, 1989, pp. 2, 12).

The topic of eating beyond prescribed limits appears throughout the diverse texts of the Bible, which comprises various genres of literature composed and edited between the tenth century BCE and as late as the second century CE. The terms “glutton” or “gluttons” are used frequently in the popular New International Version (NIV) of the Bible to translate the Hebrew terms *zolel* (a “despicable” or “prodigal” person) and *nefesh* (“soul,” “creature,” or “throat”), and the Greek *gasteres* (“bellies”). The Oxford Dictionary defines “gluttony” as “habitual greed or excess in eating.” Many biblical passages treat gluttony with severity: parents of a rebellious adult son should denounce him as “a glutton and a drunkard” and have him stoned to death by the town elders (Deut 21:18-21); sons are warned that “a companion of gluttons disgraces his father” (Prov 28:7), that “those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat” as “drunkards and gluttons become poor” (Prov 23:20-21), and that “you” should “put a knife to your throat if you are given to gluttony” (Prov 23:2); and the citizens of Jerusalem are warned that God destroyed the city of Sodom because its citizens were “overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy” (Ezek 16:49-50). Several verses from the New Testament

epistles (letters) warn against people who do not regulate their appetites, calling them “lazy gluttons”—literally, “lazy bellies” (Titus 1.12)—and declaring that those whose “god is their stomach” will be destroyed (Phil 3:19).

The extreme seriousness of excessive food consumption also is mediated to contemporary Christians through Bible study guides, bestselling devotional writers, and preachers with a wide print and digital reach. Bible verses commonly are excerpted and applied to the “sin” of “gluttony,” which is described as a form of “idolatry” that should be treated as seriously as alcoholism or adultery (BibleStudyTools.com, 2021). The well-known pastor, writer, and podcaster John Piper defines “gluttony” as “having a craving for food that conquers you” (Piper, 2008); in a video lecture on the text “their god is their belly” (Phil 3:19, ESV), he warns that “whether it’s eating a whole pack of Oreo cookies, or whether it’s homosexual behavior or fornication, or whether it’s utterly ridiculous self-exaltation at the office,” those who indulge ungodly appetites are on a path “to hell” (Piper, 2019). Using tactics gentler than the Oreos-to-hellfire warning, the devotional writer Stasi Eldredge views overeating as a symptom of insufficient intimacy with God. Comparing her college roommate to “Eve after she tasted the forbidden fruit,” Eldredge describes this woman as hiding from the world, finding “solace in sitcoms and snacks,” leaving only for class and to “restock her food supply.” According to Eldredge, women who fail to satisfy their deepest longings will instead indulge in “a second helping of ice cream or a super-sized something,” developing “an addiction to food” instead of addressing their “deep hunger” for God (Eldredge, 2010, pp. 56–58, 127).

Thus, both in Biblical texts and in the translations and various media through which Biblical perspectives are adapted for contemporary Christians, there are frequent and consistent denunciations of excessive food consumption; however, the South, despite its religious reputation, has developed a high rate of obesity. In 2019, The Associated Press released an article sharing that the states of Mississippi, West Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, South Carolina, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Alabama, respectively, have the highest obesity rates in the nation. Obesity, defined as having a body mass index of 30 or higher, is rampant in the South (Hubbard, 2020), despite what religious affiliation would suggest, implying that further investigation is necessary.

Obesity in the American South is a multi-causal issue. While the United States as a whole is undoubtedly struggling with obesity (Fryar, et. al., 2020), there is a much more concentrated problem of obesity in the South (CDC, 2020). While experts and journalists increasingly present obesity as a metabolic and/or physiological issue (Walker, 2015; WHO, 2017), Evangelical Christians often see obesity as a moral and spiritual issue (Piper, 2008; Sack, 2001). Also, though poverty is possibly the most commonly cited source of obesity problems, the phenomenon in the South seems to stretch beyond those limitations. In recent data reported by the CDC, regardless of race, low-income individuals did not have the highest obesity rates. In fact, in White and Hispanic men, obesity was higher in the middle income group, and in Black men, obesity was most prevalent in the highest income group (CDC, 2020b). This implies that a deeper understanding of the links between demographic characteristics and obesity is necessary to predict and prevent poor eating habits and obesity issues in the South.

The obesity rates in the South demand a re-evaluation of nutrition education or promotion programs as well as curricula, campaigns, or policies tailored for more specific demographics and religiously motivated subcultures. Once the perspectives of Evangelical Christians in the American South are better understood, nutrition-based marketing messages can engage that paradigm more effectively. In addition to teachings on “gluttony,” the Bible also contains

teachings on the practice of fasting and on care for the body. Acknowledging the paradigms common in the Bible Belt, it would be logical to market healthy and nutritional food options to accommodate those Biblically motivated preferences (Rainbolt et al., 2012).

Research Problem

A thorough exploration of the dissonance between the eating habits and religious beliefs of Christians in the South is needed to help better prepare professionals who communicate about food and nutrition to consumers. Obviously in the case of the Bible Belt, understanding simple demographics has not been enough to produce effective communication, as more than 30 percent of adults in the South are obese, according to the CDC (2020b), yet Pew Research Center reported in 2020 that 76 percent of adults in the South are Christians. Further, there are many factors that play into food purchasing and consumption decisions (Köster, 2009). So, understanding the reasoning behind the eating habits of those in the South is crucial to developing more meaningful nutrition education programming.

Religion's impact (or lack thereof) on eating habits and body weight is an important issue, but research on this topic has been described as limited (Cline & Ferraro, 2006). Since Cline and Ferraro's 2006 study, there has been little research on the topic, and marketing communicators find a gap in knowledge that is necessary to fill in order to market food to consumers in the Bible Belt using approaches related to nutrient-dense food.

Purpose and Research Questions

In the Southern region of the US, where rampant a multitude of factors are leading to obesity, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary to improve communication campaigns as well as educational efforts, both in the classroom and among adults, intended to aid in nutritional, healthy lifestyle choices and stop the rapid increase of obesity rates (ten Hoor et al., 2017). This research is intended to initiate understanding of how obesity in the South persists even though the majority of inhabitants subscribe to a faith that discourages unhealthy lifestyles. Furthermore, the information presented in this research should begin to fill the knowledge gap for communicators concerning the dissonance between Christianity in the South and the unhealthy eating habits of Southerners.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do Christians in the South perceive food and its purpose for individuals and for society?
2. How are health and nutrition perceived by Christians in the South?
3. What do Christians in the South believe the Bible says regarding health?
4. To what extent are Christians in the South aware of dissonance between their eating habits and their knowledge of nutrition and health topics in biblical teachings?

Review of Literature

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

This study was guided by the Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957), which suggests that when any two cognitive elements, such as attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs, are relevant but inconsistent, a state of discomfort, or dissonance, exists. Festinger's (1957) theory

suggests that people have an inner drive to hold all attitudes and behavior in harmony and avoid dissonance. In a state of discomfort, people will use one of three modes to reduce the dissonance: information seeking, attitude change, and trivializing (Lindsey-Mullikin, 2003).

For the purposes of this study, Festinger's (1957) theory was the foundation for understanding when, or if, Christians in the South felt a dissonance regarding their beliefs and eating habits. Furthermore, the theory provided framework for understanding the methods by which participants of the study pursued consonance between their attitudes and actions. This theory was used to understand if and how the inconsistency between the behavior of overeating/unhealthy eating by Christians in the South exists, as well as the attitudes about what the Bible says regarding food and health.

Upon realizing the inconsistencies between their behaviors and attitudes, humans sometimes may find themselves in a dissonance. Cognitive Dissonance Theory explains that people can take a few different approaches to reconcile their beliefs and actions. They can change their attitudes, behaviors, or perceptions of their behaviors. For example, they could change their behavior regarding how they eat. On the other hand, they could change their attitudes, which would typically mean stepping away from their already-established beliefs to reconsider how they might think differently. However, the final option could be a change in behavior perception. In this case, these people would convince themselves that their habits are not a problem at all, trivializing the issue. Finally, there could be a combination of the three in an attempt to rationalize the inconsistencies and regain cognitive harmony.

Obesity and the South

While the US is undoubtedly struggling with obesity (Fryar et al., 2020), there is a more concentrated problem of obesity in the South (CDC, 2020b). According to the US Census Bureau (2016), the South is defined to include Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Of these 17 states, only Florida and the District of Columbia fall below a 30% obesity rate (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2020), and the number of individuals with obesity is increasing each year (CDC, 2020a).

Religion in the South

In the Southern United States, Evangelical Protestantism is a significant social and political cultural influence (Harvey, 2015). Evangelical Protestantism typically is distinguished from "mainline" Protestantism, which includes denominations with institutional histories stemming from the Protestant Reformation, such as the Lutheran, Episcopal, and Presbyterian churches (Diamond, 2009). By contrast, Bebbington traced "Evangelical Protestant" to revival movements in the eighteenth century and identified its four distinctive "marks" or "priorities" as "conversionism," "activism," "biblicism," and "crucicentrism" (Bebbington, 1989). Denominations typically identified with Evangelical Protestantism include Baptists, the Churches of Christ, Methodists, Pentecostal churches, Plymouth Brethren, Reformed (Calvinist) churches, and nondenominational churches (Stiller, 2015). However, denominational boundaries are imprecise, and the Public Religion Research Institute distinguishes "evangelical Protestants" from "mainline (non-evangelical) Protestants" by asking whether survey respondents identify as "born again" or "evangelical Protestants." If they answer yes to either "born again" or "evangelical," they are classified as "evangelical Protestants." By this definition, "white

evangelical Protestants” are “most heavily concentrated in counties in the South and lower Midwest” (PRRI Staff, 2021).

Evangelical Protestants also were selected for this study due to their high concentration in the South and due to their high regard for biblical authority, which is necessary for determining the existence of cognitive dissonance between religious beliefs and personal actions. Evangelical “biblicism” is not primarily doctrinal, for early Evangelicals aimed “to encourage [the Bible’s] devotional use rather than to develop a doctrine of scripture” (Bebbington, 1989, p. 13). However, Evangelicals today are increasingly associated with doctrines of biblical “infallibility” or “inerrancy,” which are more particular to the early twentieth-century movement known as Fundamentalism (Marsden, 1980). These doctrines were especially contentious in the American South, where biblical defenses of slavery were widespread (Gomes, 1996, pp. 84—101), where the Scopes Monkey Trial (1925) pitted a literal reading of Genesis against the Darwinian model of evolution, and where the legal regulation of human sexuality and gender identity are current live issues. In each of these cases, the American South has become known for doubling down on Biblical literalism and infallibility. More recently, the progressive evangelical leader Brian D. McLaren proposed a shift from viewing the Bible as a “legal constitution” to regarding it as a “community library” with a range of resources for grappling with ethical dilemmas and cultivating devotion to God (McLaren, 2010, pp. 78—86). However, Evangelical Christians in the American South typically profess a commitment to Biblical infallibility and inerrancy, while also modifying the degree to which particular teachings are considered binding upon Christians or applicable to contemporary American life. (Surely none would prescribe that gluttons be stoned to death [Deut 21:18—21]). Evangelical Christians differ on the precise implications of the Bible’s “inerrancy” and on the political stances that a commitment to biblical authority seems to entail, yet they broadly share the “particular regard for the Bible” and the emphasis on its “devotional use” that Bebbington described. Biblical texts are therefore significant sources for their beliefs about eating habits.

Dissonance between Beliefs and Lifestyles

Despite its religious reputation, the American South has developed a high rate of obesity. Kim et al. (2003) concluded that men in conservative Protestant denominations were more likely to have a higher body weight than men in other religious affiliations, although this was not the case for women. Furthermore, Baptists have a higher rate of obesity than members of other denominations, with other Protestant denominations not far behind (Cline & Ferraro, 2006). The obesity rates among Protestants is said to be traced to the deep-rooted food culture in US religions, which could be perceived as actually promoting gluttony. Many church functions use food, rather than alcohol, as the celebratory good to be consumed (Sack, 2001). From Sunday School doughnuts to church pot-luck dinners, food, especially high-fat foods, seems to be the key to the functioning of a church’s social organization. Sack (2001) speculated that Baptists may find food to be one of the few available sources of earthly pleasure, especially as they encourage abstaining from consumption of other products like alcohol and tobacco. Further, there is some evidence of rationalizing in Piper’s own teachings on “gluttony,” when he distinguishes “obesity” and body weight—which could have many causes and need not be condemned in themselves—from the sin of “gluttony” (Piper, 2008). Still, the range of biblical and additional sources surveyed above reveals the extensive teachings against the overconsumption of food.

Food and Nutrition Marketing in the South

Recent research in the agricultural communications discipline has highlighted the difficulty of reaching consumers with marketing messages focused on nutrition. Studies show that consumers rely most heavily on family and friends for information about nutrition from their close circle of friends and family (CFI, 2018; Dubois et al., 2016; Rockers et al, 2020; Rumble & Irani, 2016), from online searches, and from health professionals. Marketing professionals report that Southern consumers can be especially difficult to reach because they don't respond to the types of communication that their counterparts in other states (Simplemachine Marketing, 2016). In order to speak directly to Southerners, a brand needs to develop a deep, nearly personal relationship with consumers (Simplemachine Marketing, 2016). Also, according to Wilson (2014), there is a much higher rate of outdoor activities in the South, and fewer miles driven per year (which affects advertising via billboards), less engagement with television and radio, and lower levels of sports and hobby groups. Evidence from Wilson's (2014) publication shows that the modern South is still holding on to vestiges of a preindustrial folk culture in its leisure. This further supports the idea that Southern states cannot be marketed to in the same ways as the rest of the nation, because they live differently and respond to types of communication differently than other states.

In recent years, companies have seen the reality of what can happen when underestimating the power of religious beliefs. Eric Kuhn, senior vice president of social media marketing for CBS, wrote about the poor feedback received when Lowes changed "Christmas trees" into "family trees" in a campaign. Shortly after, Lowes changed the reference back to "Christmas trees" to save their reputation (Kuhn, 2011). Another example is the tactic of closing on Sundays to respect Christian communities as well (Kuhn, 2011), as evangelical Protestants believe that Sunday is a holy day, created by God for resting (Ferguson, 2013). A 2017 study also showed that religious people associated with Islam or Christianity were much more sensitive to marketing campaigns if it defied their beliefs, confirming that religion should be considered when developing advertisements in a highly religious community (Viita, 2017). Knowing this, it was deemed valuable to understand the food selection and consumption of Christians in the South in order to point to consumer preferences and habits for the sake of marketing more effectively.

Methodology

This was a qualitative, descriptive case study employing semi-structured interviews and an emphasis on thematic analysis as described by Miles et al. (2020). To uncover the complexity of this topic, it was necessary to not only examine how behaviors are developed or what factors affect them, but also to provide more in-depth examination and understanding of individuals and their behaviors. This methodology was used to characterize attitudes and actions in their naturally occurring settings without any intervention or manipulation of variables. Qualitative research is holistic and involves a rich collection of data from various sources to gain a deeper understanding of individual participants' opinions, perspectives, and attitudes (Nassaji, 2015).

Subject Selection

When considering participant selection, the researchers utilized network recruiting (Patton, 2002) to gather 11 purposively selected participants by contacting key informants from

Evangelical Protestant churches (which have high views of biblical authority) in seven different states—Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Tennessee. These informants represented multiple denominations within Protestant Christianity in the South—Baptist, Methodist, Church of Christ, Pentecostal, and nondenominational. For this study, the participants all needed to be self-identified Christians who were residents of the Southern states; this was affirmed by the key informants and reaffirmed at the beginning of each interview. Participants generally equally represented males and females, as well as age groups of 18–22, 23–30, 31–55, and 56–100.

Finally, race and income/socioeconomic status are often regarded as key demographics linked with obesity in the South. However, the CDC recently reported that obesity rates were relatively similar across the most prevalent ethnicities in the South (non-Hispanic Black adults at 49.9%, Hispanic adults at 45.6%, and non-Hispanic White adults at 41.4%). As a result of this knowledge and other literature previously mentioned, the researchers selected participants only from the middle- and high-income groups and of non-Hispanic White ethnicity. The 2020 US Census Bureau reported that 56% of the South is non-Hispanic White (US Census Bureau, 2022), and the authors sought to understand subjects who represented these demographics in the South and expand the knowledge regarding obesity to a deeper understanding beyond racial and economic characteristics.

The current study was approved by the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board (IRB# 2104330280).

Instrumentation, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

The study employed semi-structured field interviews, allowing the interviewer to follow a systematic guide of developed questions, while providing the freedom to ask relevant questions that emerged during the interview process (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The interviews occurred through Zoom meetings, which provided many benefits (Archibald, 2019), including social distancing during COVID-19 quarantine as well as automated transcriptions.

At the conclusion of the interviews, the researchers interpreted the data by identifying recurring themes, patterns, and concepts and then describing and translating those categories (Huberman & Miles, 2002). A thematic analysis was accomplished using NVivo 11, a qualitative data analysis software, and the researchers followed Krippendorff's (1980) approach to theme development. The constant-comparative method was implemented to ensure emerging themes were constant across all content (Boeije, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Qualitative Rigor

During the analysis process, intercoder agreement (Guest et al., 2012) between two coders was sought using data from two pilot interviews and two early interviews. For this study, the percent agreement between the two coders was measured to be 85.29%. Further, peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was also employed periodically throughout the data analysis to assist with the management of potential researcher bias. Referential adequacy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was accomplished through the development of an audit trail using NVivo11, which provided raw data, personal notes, and documented supporting evidence of every emerging theme. Finally, member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were also employed via email to establish dependability and confirmability, and, with no objections from the subjects, the interpretations were deemed to be accurate perceptions of the interviews.

Limitations

This study was one that utilized the researcher as an instrument, which allowed for the researcher to be the primary tool for data collection and analysis. Therefore, according to Grandy (2018), the researcher has provided a reflexivity statement below to provide insight into the lens through which the data were analyzed. Also, although the definition of the South consists of many more states, because of limited funding it was practical that this study only consist of participants from Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Tennessee, and while subjects were selected from these states, the small number of subjects (11) and the nature of case study research approach prevented the findings from being generalizable beyond the study participants.

Reflexivity Statement

Though biases can never be completely removed, the researcher acknowledged such bias during all phases of the study and provided a subjectivity statement to help readers understand her frame of reference during data analysis (Peshkin, 1988). The primary researcher in this study was born and raised in the South and the Southern Baptist Church. She identifies as highly committed in Christianity and believes that the Bible guides her decisions and thinking. She is extremely involved in church activities including young adult ministries and college student ministries in which she leads Bible studies, meets with students regularly to discuss beliefs, and participates in weekly gatherings with her church. Furthermore, the researcher regularly attends church on Sundays, reads the Bible, prays, and surrounds herself with other Christians. The researcher was also born and raised in Mississippi and now lives in Arkansas. Therefore, the researcher is identified as a “Southerner.” As such, she gained insights on how other Southerners purchase, prepare, and consume foods.

The supervisor of this research also served as a second coder during data analysis. He is a professor and researcher in the discipline of agricultural communications. Raised in the South in the Southern Baptist tradition, he is currently a practicing Methodist, living in the South, who is active in church activities and ministries as well.

The primary researcher and the faculty overseeing this project recognized that the researchers’ personal perspectives inherently introduced an element of bias in this study. However, the primary researcher made intentional attempts to remain as objective as possible by allowing the research to be guided by previous literature and theory, and she welcomed challenging opinions and comments from faculty and peers during the entirety of the project. Furthermore, various efforts to establish qualitative rigor were put in place to ensure that any obvious bias throughout the data analysis and reporting process was removed from the study.

Findings

The findings of this study describe the perceptions of the interviewed Christians in the South as they pertain to food and its purpose, health and nutrition, spiritual beliefs on food and health, and awareness and reconciliation of related dissonance. Further, subjects’ perceptions of their relationships with food, as well as of the connection between food and church culture, are described. The findings, preceded with a description of subjects’ demographic characteristics (Table 1), are previewed in Table 2 and are then presented in order of the study’s research questions.

Table 1*Demographics of Study Participants (N=11)*

| Name | Age | Gender | Denomination | Location |
|--------------------|------------|---------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Harley Crosby | 64 | Female | Methodist | Sumrall, MS |
| Danielle Henderson | 59 | Female | Church of Christ | Northport, AL |
| Charles Rutledge | 44 | Male | Methodist | Sumrall, MS |
| Justin Small | 51 | Male | Pentecostal | Petal, MS |
| Jonathan Truman | 25 | Male | Baptist | Nashville, TN |
| Deborah Beasley | 23 | Female | Nondenominational | Rockmart, GA |
| Lucas Strong | 18 | Male | Baptist | Fayetteville, Ar |
| Wilson Camp | 24 | Male | Nondenominational | Gallatin, TN |
| Chris Martin | 20 | Male | Church of Christ | Charlotte, NC |
| Heather Elliot | 18 | Female | Baptist | Shreveport, LA |
| Trina Bates | 36 | Female | Baptist | Hattiesburg, MS |

Note. Pseudonyms were assigned to subjects to protect their identities.

Table 2*Overview of Emergent Themes with Frequencies of Occurrence in Interviews (N=11)*

| Category | Theme | Participants Mentioning Theme |
|--|---|--------------------------------------|
| Perceptions of Christians in the South on food and its purpose | Sustenance/survival | 11 |
| | Bringing people together | 8 |
| Perceptions of Christians in the South on health and nutrition | Levels of knowledge | |
| | Average | 6 |
| | High | 3 |
| | Low | 2 |
| | Sources of nutrition and health knowledge | |
| | Experts | 5 |
| | Online | 5 |
| Family | 4 | |
| Christians in the South and their spiritual beliefs on food and health | Bible is inerrant | 11 |
| Descriptions of a God-honoring lifestyle | (No singular theme) | |
| Biblical references to food and health | Body is a temple | 9 |
| | Gluttony and overeating | 7 |
| Reasons for food selection | Taste and desirability | 11 |
| | Personal experience with gluttony | 10 |
| | Church culture with food | 8 |

Perceptions of Christians in the South on Food and its Purpose

Sustenance/ Survival

All participants stated in varying terms that a purpose of food is to sustain life. Each participant said that food serves as fuel for their bodies and that it is needed for survival. Wilson Camp explained the importance of food for his body: “The purpose of food for me—to keep me awake in the day. I mean, it’s a source of energy.” Heather Elliot explained that the purpose of food is to sustain and argued that as the reason God gave the world food: “just sustainability, to keep on living. That’s, like, the reason, that’s why God’s given it to us.”

Bringing People Together

Out of 11 participants, eight claimed that a purpose for food was to bring people together and to bring fellowship into a community. When asked about the purpose of food, Jonathan Truman said that food gives people a reason to gather together.

When I talk about events, reasons for gathering, what it is that brings us together. [It’s] food that brings people together. People see that with food and value that, and they see it as an opportunity to share. It’s really galvanizing, I mean, just sharing a meal together... so I think it’s very valuable. It is an intimate, kind of a familial staple. You want, as a family, to have food around the table together. And that’s an opportunity to be able to catch up and see where we’re all at.

Trina Bates added that food serves social purposes in her personal life and in society.

There’s also a social aspect to it, too, because I have people over to my house all the time, and we do dinner, and it’s like a family affair. So, I don’t know, it’s got meaning other than just fuel, it’s social interaction, too.

Perceptions of Christians in the South on Health and Nutrition

Most (n=6) participants self-identified as having an average level of knowledge regarding health and nutrition. For example, Wilson Camp self-identified as having an average amount of knowledge, explaining that he learned just enough to help maintain his weight.

I mean, I would say I have a pretty well enough level of nutrition, or just the basics of nutrition. Like, I know all about macros. I count calories and I also count macros. When it comes to the specific little details of food, like, you know, the processed ingredients, I don’t know much about that. The main thing I look at is carbs, protein, fats, and that’s about all I look at. So, I mean, I know enough to say I’m in shape or to say I eat right.

During the interviews, participants identified the sources of their information regarding health and nutrition. This included a variety of sources, like experts (health care providers and physical trainers), online resources, diet programs, and parents or family. Out of 11 participants, only one referenced school-based nutritional education. However, that participant, Harley Crosby, only mentioned that her nutrition education from school was not memorable, referencing USDA’s now-outdated Food Guide Pyramid: “You learn nutrition in school and you know you need the pyramid. Which, I can’t tell you now what’s at the top of it, but I do know there is a food pyramid.”

Christians in the South and Their Spiritual Beliefs on Food and Health

The Bible is Inerrant

Every participant said they believe everything in the Bible is true and the document is inerrant. This information was significant for the purposes of this study because participants often mentioned that they view the Bible as the high authority and set of directions for their lives. In fact, all participants self-identified as being highly committed to their religion and described reading and learning the contents of the Bible as being important in their lives. Danielle Henderson emphasized that all her decisions are based on the Bible. She explained that she seeks to read and understand God's word as a responsibility of being a Christian.

I'm trying to live for God and so, all my decisions, everything that I do, I look to what God's word tells me to do. He's the only one I'm trying to please. So, the only way I can know how to please Him is to read the Bible. I should study it as He tells us, so everything I do is for Him.

Descriptions of a God-Honoring Lifestyle

All 11 Christians in the South were prompted to describe characteristics of a God-honoring lifestyle. All responses were unique and there was no true central theme. Each participant provided a variety of ideas associated with a God-honoring lifestyle including reading the Bible, praying, evangelizing, putting God first, and abstaining from sins related to sex and alcohol. However, despite the participants already identifying characteristics of their own personal lives regarding faith and scriptural references to health and food, there was no mention of food, nutrition, or health as it pertains to a Godly lifestyle. Chris Martin said, "one in which you are honoring yourself and honoring others. Selflessness, not prioritizing your whims. And, yeah, selfless servitude I think is like what that means." Deborah Beasley defined a God-honoring lifestyle a bit differently:

... living life in purity, as in choosing to do just really what you're taught and what you believe is right and living by that. And, I think as long as you stay pure in your heart, like you're still going to make probably wrong decisions, but at least your intentions are clear, and that's more the way of living.

Biblical References to Food and Health

The participants were also asked to explain what they believe the Bible says about food and health. Two common themes—(1) *the body is a temple*, and (2) *gluttony and overeating*—surfaced as participants described what the Bible says about food and nutrition.

The Body is a Temple

Although each participant gave multiple answers, more than half of all participants mentioned their beliefs that the body is a temple and the Bible instructs people to protect and take care of their "temple." One participant, Charles Rutledge, explained this phrase and that the Bible calls people to take care of their body: "I think that you need to treat your body like a temple and you need to make sure that you fuel your body in the way that you should, not the way you shouldn't." These Christians from the South consistently agreed that the Bible instructs

to take care of the human body. However, in one reference to the body being a temple, Jonathan Truman mentioned that, though he agrees that the body should be well-maintained, this scripture is being used out of context.

The passage that most people take talks about "your body as a temple," the Holy Spirit's dwelling, and it should be respected as such. And so that's where a lot of people lean on as the cornerstone passage of eating healthy foods and taking care of yourself physically. I kind of break that down a little bit, because it's more so talking about sexual purity in the context of Paul's writing. But the Biblical hermeneutics, speaking of the Biblical principle, is that your body is not your own and it's been given to you from the Lord to take care of it just like you would your mind, mentally. What you put in and is what you put out. And so your spirituality, your soul, take care of your heart. It's the same thing physically, with your body, so that is the Biblical principle that I believe in.

So, the majority of participants believed that the reference to "the body is a temple" was justification for believing that the Bible brings attention to healthy living.

Gluttony and Overeating

Among other unique answers, gluttony and overeating was referenced among half of participants. Trina Bates explained that food is from God, but that the Bible is very clear on the stance of gluttony: "God gave us food for nutrition, He gave it to us for survival, but the Bible is clear that gluttony is bad. Anything in excess is bad." While there were several answers, including fasting and the Last Supper, only gluttony and the idea of the body as a temple were repeated by multiple participants. Deborah Beasley even identified gluttony as the overall theme of Biblical references to food and health. "In all honesty, the only thing I could say to wrap it up in a nutshell is that gluttony is a sin, and that's about it."

Defining Gluttony. As a result of these responses, participants were later asked to define gluttony based on their knowledge of what the term meant. This question sought to understand what Christians believe gluttony is, given that so many determined that it is a sin in their religion. Lucas Strong indicated that gluttony is in reference to overeating or eating past the point when one should stop: "I guess it's excessive eating. Just eating too much to the point that you're over-full." Danielle Henderson mentioned health consequences as a result of overeating while defining gluttony.

Gluttony, to me, is overeating. It's based on portion size to me. When you eat too much, that's gluttony. In our society, we have a tendency to think that every time we eat, we ought to fill up. And that's really not how we should look at food. We should eat food to sustain us, not to fill us up. That's one reason there are so many people that are becoming type two diabetics, because we have a terrible view of how much we should eat.

Awareness of Dissonance and Reconciliation

Participants were also asked about their experiences with food, gluttony, and church culture. Participants did not initially appear to be aware of existing dissonance during the interviews. It was when they were asked if they were aware of any gluttonous habits in their personal lives that their responses revealed more awareness of their dissonance. By the end of the interviews, they had revealed many ways that they reconcile the dissonance by trivializing the

problem of gluttony. They also excused it as a cultural norm in the South, as an important part of church culture, as a natural personal trait, and as an emotional coping mechanism.

Reasons for Food Selection

All participants referred to taste and desirability as reasons for their selection of foods for each meal, making it the most prominent answer. One participant, Lucas Strong, said there was no significance behind the decisions he made, but rather just a selection based on what he wanted at the time of a meal: "It's just whatever sounds good, I guess. I just say, 'Okay looks good.'" A similar response came from Heather Elliott: "I guess there's not a whole lot of thought that I put into it. It's just what I'm feeling for that day."

Personal Experiences with Gluttony

Participants were asked if they thought gluttony was a personal experience in their own lives. Most of the participants responded by acknowledging habitual gluttony in their lives, as well as providing a bit of insight on those experiences. For example, Justin Small shared a story about his overindulgence in seafood causing bodily harm, and his experience in continuing regardless of his health.

Yes, I do see gluttony [in my life]. I have done it. And my biggest fault is going to buffets. That, and in the past, my favorite food was seafood, and I would love to go to seafood buffets. Now, I can't anymore because I have developed an allergy to seafood. My doctor, whenever I was found to have this allergy, said there's probably an overindulgence in seafood to blame for it. And I'm just being honest, when I was a kid and I lived on the coast with my dad, every day I would go out and I would take my crab net and I would catch crabs until lunchtime. I'd bring them home and cook them up and that was every day. I just love seafood. Crawfish, shrimp, crab, that was my favorite, and I ate it every chance I got. When I started developing the allergy, and this is the experience of my gluttony, even though it was hurting me and I knew that it was, I would just take me some Benadryl before I would go eat. But then it got to the point that, you know, and this was a God thing. God said, "Oh now, if you touch it, you're history." So now I carry around EPI pens and stuff.

Trina Bates shared how clearly she sees gluttony in her own life and how heavily it relates to being in the South.

You know, so, it's pretty clear on what [the Bible] says, now we in the South don't always follow that... So yes, I would say yes to gluttony in my life, I live in the South. I mean every Thanksgiving we are gluttons. We have two turkeys and those things are deep fried. So yes, I would say that is a problem that I have, and I do struggle with that, but people don't want to talk about that as being a sin, but it is. And the bad thing is it's a very visible sin, because if you're a glutton most people know it! You know, the South is a breeding ground for gluttony, unfortunately.

Another participant, Charles Rutledge, described gluttony as a struggle in his life that revolves around taste, desires, and boredom.

Oh, I absolutely see it. It's like, you know you're not hungry and you know there's no reason to eat ice cream at 11 o'clock at night, but you really want ice cream because you like the way it tastes. You're going to sit there and eat a half gallon, you know, a quarter of a gallon ice cream, because you really want to do it. Raise your hand if you've done that (raises hand). Or you're sitting there, and you know you're not hungry, but those Cheez-Its that your kids love so much, you really, really, really like Cheez-Its with a Coke. You shouldn't be drinking that coke at 10 o'clock at night, you know what I mean? Half a bag, a box of Cheez-Its. That's me. I used to do that quite often, so it's not healthy to do it, it really isn't. I should really be mindful and have some mental strength about it. It's hard, it's really hard not to be just eat something bad for me.

Other participants referenced gluttony in their life as a source of comfort among hard times. Harley Crosby explained how she often opts for overeating to get through emotions.

I think so. Yes, I have gluttony in my life. Like when I tell you when I get worried and I get upset about something, eating tends to be my way to make myself better. And, so, I tend to eat too much. I tend to like midnight snacks, you know? If I would stop eating at six o'clock and go to bed, or just drink water or just be sensible, I wouldn't have the health issues that I have.

Chris Martin approached his justification of gluttony as it being associated heavily with his personality and natural tendencies. However, he concludes by addressing the fact that his gluttonous actions never yield the results that he hopes to be satisfied with.

Yeah, absolutely, I've been gluttonous. I don't know if you're familiar with the Enneagram? It's like a personality inventory. I'm a seven, and sevens are, like, the most gluttonous type. So, the answer is yes, absolutely. All forms of excess ... I like to think that I like am much more controlled in those things than I have been in the past, but it's absolutely a struggle for me. I pretty intimately understand what it means to be a gluttonous person, and what kind of brokenness that brings and how filling yourself up too much leads to so much emptiness.

Church Culture with Food

Finally, the subjects were asked to describe the culture that they see with their home churches and the food consumption there. The majority of responses pointed back to a theme of fellowship and eating together as a reason to gather around unhealthy foods. Harley Crosby shared that eating together is a common occurrence within her church, and there is often an abundance of food to the point that everyone takes home an extra plate.

Eating together and fellowshiping together was a big deal... We have it every time you turn around, once a month at least. And when we do eat at church, it's, as you can imagine, everything you can imagine, and more than we would ever eat. So, a lot of us would go home with an extra plate to eat that night.

Jonathan Truman explained how food is a big part of programming at his church. He shared how it brings people together and how it's nearly a necessity among church events in the South.

Yeah, so I would say food is a valuable staple in a lot of our events and programs. Like, food, it brings people together and we believe that. Especially in the south, I mean people love their food and any occasion for meeting, I mean there's got to be food. Some sort of treat. They're not always healthy, and most the time it's not.

Chris Martin shared about his experiences at multiple churches and how food played different roles. He also explained the Biblical basis for their placing importance on food and eating together.

That was like such an important part of my early childhood was church potlucks. Like gathering, eating together, like the rhythm of that. And at our new church in Charlotte, that was one thing that I was kind of taken aback by was the lack of potlucks. And, so, I guess at my new church, we eat together, but one thing my dad talks a lot about is the importance of Jesus eating with people. Who He sat at the table with was very telling of His ministry and how important it is that we sit down and eat with people ... But like eating is like, eating together is a very basic facet of human connection.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Previous research recommended that religion be considered when developing communication efforts in a highly religious community (Viita, 2017). The Southern Christian subjects in this study had different needs for marketing and communication tactics. This confirms the literature by Simplemachine Marketing (2016), which argues that communication efforts need to be catered to very specific audience demographics, and Southern culture is a unique phenomenon to be understood before effective and transformative communication can be accomplished.

Perceptions of Christians in the South on Food and its Purpose

In seeking to answer Research Question 1, an overwhelming number of participants revealed that they understood a purpose of food to be survival and sustenance. However, multiple participants also emphasized that food often plays an important role in connecting people socially. They reported observing this in both their personal lives and society. Food was credited with being the reason for which people come together. Ties were made to food involved in religious gatherings and familial gatherings. This is consistent with the works of Sack (2001), who noted that food seems to be the key to the functioning of a church's social organization. Furthermore, some participants in this study described food, particularly tasty and often unhealthy, as a key element in recruiting people to events of all kinds, as there is often an expectation of food to be provided. This reflects the claims made by Sack (2001), which stated that many church functions use food as the celebratory good to be consumed.

Perceptions of Christians in the South on Health and Nutrition

The majority of Christians from the South who were interviewed self-identified as having an average level of knowledge of food, nutrition, and health, which contributed to answering Research Question 2. Furthermore, as most participants described their knowledge as being average, the issue of lacking necessary nutritional education in order to fight obesity and other

diet-related problems began to match previous literature (Dumoitier et al., 2019). Participants who identified as having a high level of knowledge regarding food and health shared that while they have a high understanding of how food affects their bodies, they often opt for unhealthy eating options. Moreover, all participants who self-identified as having a high level of knowledge on nutrition and health attained their information through personal connections this supports the findings of numerous studies highlighting interpersonal relationships as sources of nutrition information (CFI, 2018; Dubois et al., 2016; Rockers et al., 2020; Rumble & Irani, 2016). Another notable theme among participants was that none of them shared a proactive mindset regarding improving knowledge of nutrition and health. All participants who expressed an effort to seek information explained that they did so as a result of acute health issues.

Christians in the South and Their Spiritual Beliefs on Food and Health

Research Question 3 sought to understand what selected Christians in the South believe the Bible says regarding health. To answer that, the Christians from across the South who participated in this study first all agreed that the Bible is true and inerrant, which confirmed their consistency of beliefs among Evangelical Protestant Christians shaped by Fundamentalism, as described by Marsden (1980). Furthermore, the majority of participants self-identified as being highly committed to their religion and described reading and learning the contents of the Bible as being important in their lives. Following the confirmation of Scriptural authority and inerrancy, each participant was asked about Biblical contexts of food and health. The two most noted themes were references to *the body as a temple* and *gluttony and overeating*. This demonstrated a basic familiarity with Biblical themes typified by pastors such as John Piper (2008;2019), who has published popular sermons on gluttony and temptation.

In addressing Research Question 3, participants were also asked to describe a God-honoring lifestyle. Despite already discussing Biblical contexts of food and health, as well as various dietary decisions, no participants mentioned healthy or nutritional lifestyle choices as a characteristic of a God-honoring lifestyle. This points to the fact that, although these Christians in the South recognized the Biblical instructions of maintaining their body as temples, they still did not immediately associate this as an aspect of living a Godly life. However, with discussions of maintaining sexual purity and abstaining from a “partying” lifestyle, participants of this study confirmed the research literature by Sack (2001) and Cline and Ferraro (2006). These authors argued that Christians do recognize the sin of overeating but often dismiss it by condemning other sins more and allowing food to be their “vice.” This dismissal is an act of trivializing to achieve consonance, as described in Lindsey-Mullikin’s (2003) application of Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957). These conclusions regarding spiritual beliefs about food and health were inextricable from conclusions related to Research Question 4, which focused on awareness and reconciliation of dissonance.

Awareness of Dissonance and Reconciliation

Despite the Southern Christians in this study explaining their beliefs on the purposes of food, their beliefs on Biblical food consumption, and their knowledge levels of health and nutrition, no participant referenced any of these factors when describing their decision-making process in buying and consuming foods. All participants referred to the importance of taste and desirability in the foods they decide to purchase and/or consume for themselves. This was largely in contrast to their original statements earlier in the interviews in which they explained that the

purpose of food is for survival and bringing people together. In fact, many participants even cited taste and desirability as their *only* factor in decision making. The contradictions in how multiple participants responded was clear evidence of dissonance related to their decisions about food selections. Attitudes, beliefs, and actions were not in consonance, as Festinger's (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory explains, and participants were demonstrating efforts to seek consonance.

Finally, the majority of participants admitted to committing habitual gluttony. This revealed that most of the Southern Christians in this study were aware of the dissonance, which addressed Research Question 4.

Data also showed that these Christians in the South recognized the presence of their dissonance but still made unhealthy decisions because they desired good food. Many participants credited Southern culture, as well as church culture, with much of this type of decision making. Several study participants achieved a reconciliation by trivializing the dissonance (Lindsey-Mullikin, 2003). In fact, these Southern Christians referred to Biblical stories exemplifying church communities and fellowship associated with meals as they justified their eating habits, causing them to downplay the fact that their eating habits may have been gluttonous. Even while the South was called a "breeding ground for gluttony" as participants explained that good-tasting food is a need and a want in social gatherings, familial events, and church programming, the importance of these wholesome activities of fellowship apparently, for these participants, outweighed the gluttony that may accompany them. The high value placed on participating in the cultural norms of consuming unhealthy foods and/or unhealthy amounts of food at church, family, and community events appeared to help subjects further trivialize the gluttonous aspects of their participation, as described by Linsey-Mullikin, 2003).

Recommendations

The subjects explained that they did not typically make food selections based on health, nutrition, or faith. While claiming high commitment to Christianity, they did not report that they base their food purchasing and consumption on Biblical beliefs. Instead, the primary theme in decision-making, which was mentioned by all participants of the study, was taste and desirability. Therefore, it is recommended that marketing communication campaigns, to most accurately target consumers' motivations, should include marketing messaging that highlights the flavor and desirability of foods. Furthermore, professionals in this industry should orient food product marketing to be more family-based or fellowship-based in order to appeal to the perspectives that Southern Christians have on food. This conclusion both coincides with and contradicts Rockers et al.'s (2020) description of agricultural mothers' food purchase decision-making, which was highly informed through relationships with family and friends but which, conversely, did take nutrition into account. More research is clearly needed on the motivators and thought processes of consumers in regard to nutrition-based messages.

With most food marketing communications strategies still revolving mainly around demographic characteristics (Perner, n.d.), much literature argues that there is a high demand for more targeted marketing tactics (Marshall, 2015; Galloway, 2017; Quick, 2017). However, Quick (2017) also argues that generalizations made about consumers can cause communications efforts to miss an intended audience. Regarding the South, or the Bible Belt, it would be logical for communicators and educators to assume that nutrition-based marketing messages would best accommodate Biblically-motivated consumers (Rainbolt et al., 2012). However, this study revealed that the consumers in the South who participated in this project did not have biblical

motivations in mind as they made decisions about food consumption and that targeting demographics related to religious affiliation with specific marketing messages with moral implications may not provide positive results.

Furthermore, these participants showed a unique perception of their religious experiences by explaining that unhealthy eating and overindulging in food is acceptable when it is a means of fellowship with others. Many interview transcripts from this study revealed that these Christians heavily associated food with gathering together, and some participants, like Jonathan Truman and Chris Martin, even described food as an avenue for intimacy and fellowship and talked about Jesus' lifestyle of sharing meals with people. Marketing messages with this characteristic in mind could have positive results.

Communicators also should take into account the paradigms most familiar and relevant to Evangelical Christians in the American South, who are more likely to view obesity as a moral and spiritual problem than a structural problem with governmental solutions. Mike Huckabee, former governor of Arkansas (and father of the current one) claims in his testimonial and guide to weight loss that "some of the same people who demand that government stay out of our bedrooms are demanding that it take over the kitchen!" Huckabee instead proposes a limited role for government in "encouraging healthy behavior and choices," without resorting to taxes or bans on "fatty foods." Huckabee avoids explicitly Christian language, but he credits his weight loss success to his personal faith and accountability to God. He also reflects common Evangelical Christian concepts like repentance and body stewardship, explaining, "I had to accept the fact that I was not being a good steward (manager, caretaker) of the body had given me," and that "I would likely meet my Maker sooner than I intended—not because of *His* design, but because of my dereliction of duty in taking care of what He had created." When promoting pathways to personal and public health, communications approaches that echo Huckabee's references to "personal lifestyle choices," "abusing food," "addiction," and even "liberty-loving Americans," may resonate more effectively with intended audiences in the American South (Huckabee, 2005, pp. 2, 139, 153-57, 161).

Future research on this population should be conducted to develop more generalizable results and gain a deeper understanding into two key findings of this study: that taste and desirability are key purchasing criteria preferred by consumers in the Bible Belt; and that food is closely associated with church gatherings and fellowship. Further research on messaging related to these concepts for marketing and education purposes is also needed.

This study focused on a small number of purposively selected White, Evangelical consumers in the South. Recognizing that Christians in the South are a diverse population with many factors playing into their food selection decisions is key to developing effective marketing communication efforts, so research on other sub-sets of Evangelicals would add to the empirical knowledge regarding these types of consumers. However, much more opportunity exists for researchers to learn more about similar audiences. Those interested in this line of inquiry should consider similar religion-based studies in other regions of the U.S. and the world. Focusing on other major religions may also be important in a world that increasingly demands more specific and intentional messaging. Finally, further research regarding the visual aspect of marketing nutritious food based on taste and desirability may be beneficial.

Researchers should also pursue more generalizable data regarding the information sources being used by consumers for their understanding of nutrition. Participants of this study did not credit formal education, and instead referenced online sources, medical professionals, friends, and family as common sources of information about nutrition (see Dubois et al., 2016;

Rockers et al, 2020; Rumble & Irani, 2016). Understanding where information (and misinformation) comes from related to nutrition is a need in the literature. Further, a deeper investigation is recommended to better understand the food, nutrition, and health concepts and terms that consumers believe are relevant as they compare and choose the food they purchase. Describing knowledge levels of these concepts and terms could help guide nutrition-based marketing efforts as well as nutrition education efforts.

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