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Dissonance Between Christian Beliefs and Eating Habits in the South

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Dissonance Between Christian Beliefs and Eating Habits in the South

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Agricultural and Extension Education

by

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Mississippi State University
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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to initiate understanding of how obesity in the South is still so prevalent even though the majority of inhabitants subscribe to a faith that discourages unhealthy lifestyles. Furthermore, the information presented in this research sought to fill the knowledge gap for communicators and educators concerning the dissonance between Christianity in the South and the unhealthy eating habits of Southerners. Grounded in the Cognitive Dissonance Theory, this study comprised of a semi-structured interview route in which Protestant evangelical Christians in the South ($N = 11$) participated in a descriptive study conducted by a committee of agricultural communication and education faculty, a religious studies faculty member, and a master's student at the University of Arkansas. The transcripts from these interviews were hand-coded using NVivo11 software to identify themes and similarities concerning flow of information between interviews with the participants.

Several major themes emerged from these interviews. One being that all participants mentioned that the purpose of food is for sustenance and survival, as well as for bringing people together. Another theme was that most participants self-identified as having an average level of knowledge of nutrition and health. Furthermore, a major theme arose among participants in which no credit was given to marketing or educational efforts; instead, participants mentioned knowledge sourcing from healthcare professionals or personal trainers, as well as online resources. Another thematic element was found when participants were asked to provide Biblical references of food or health. The main themes in this topic were "*the Body is a Temple*" and "*gluttony*." Interestingly, when asked to explain the reasonings behind their food selections, all participants displayed a theme in referring to taste or desirability as the drive behind their food selections. Most participants claimed habitual gluttony as a personal experience in their lives.

Finally, this study concluded that there are two primary modes of “trivializing” as a way of resolving dissonance, as described by the Cognitive Dissonance Theory. Some participants justified their eating habits based off of Southern culture, while others explained that their church culture supported unhealthy eating as a means of gathering in fellowship with others.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Food choices are one of the most frequent human behaviors (Koster, 2006). These choices may seem simple, but these daily decisions are influenced by many factors. In the Southern region of the U.S., rampant with poor food choices leading to obesity, an interdisciplinary approach is a necessity 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).

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). It was a simple way to communicate; however, as technology developed, so did communication. Now, the progression of messaging has become so chaotic 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 world of agricultural communications and education, numerous reports and analyses have verified that effective communication is vital in every sector of agriculture-related activity (Zumalt, 2008). So, as agricultural communicators and educators navigate the progressive world of messaging, it is crucial to move beyond linear communication and into transactional communication. When applying the Transactional Communications Model to messages, communicators learn the importance of assessing how messages affect people, how people make purchase decisions, and what factors influence those choices (Saylor Academy,

2012). Ultimately, the investing in understanding an audience can determine if the message is received or ignored.

Generally, food is marketed based on demographic characteristics of targeted consumers (Perner, n.d.). Many businesses have invested time into studying and researching their intended audience because dividing the market into smaller segments, each with a common variable, allows companies to use their time and resources more efficiently. They can 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. Digital marketing experts estimated that most Americans are exposed to around 4,000 to 10,000 advertisements each day (Marshall, 2020). So, as consumers become more and more challenging to reach, it becomes more crucial to be effective in communicating to them (Galloway, 2017). In light of these developing challenges, an Advertising Personalization Classification System (Quick, 2017) was created so professionals could learn how to more closely aim their communication efforts. There are six levels of advertising personalization, with the most general being level 0 and the most personalized being level 5. On this scale, “Demographic Personalization” is only level 2. So, 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). So, when focusing on demographics alone (no matter how specific), the assumptions made can cause communicators to miss their intended audience.

For example, the Bible Belt consists of almost all the Southeastern US, from Virginia down to northern Florida and west to parts of Texas, Oklahoma, and Missouri (Abadi & Gal, 2018). In this area, society and politics are heavily driven by evangelical Protestantism, which is a conservative branch of Christianity that believes salvation is only achieved by grace through

faith in Jesus' atonement. These denominations, which are Baptist, Church of Christ, Methodist, Pentecostal, Plymouth Brethren, Reformed (Calvinist), and nondenominational (Stiller, 2015) believe that the Bible has full authority and is fully true (Stanley, 2013). Statistically, people in the Bible Belt tend to be socially conservative and have much higher church attendance rates than other parts of the country (Abadi & Gal, 2018). Christians believe the Bible is the fully true and authoritative word of God (Englehart, 2020).

There are several passages in the Bible that address food consumption, like Proverbs 23:20-21 (New International Version), "Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags." Christianity.com says "gluttony is defined as the over-indulgence or lack of self-restraint in food, drink, or wealth items, especially as status tokens." Gluttony is the act of worshipping food to feed one's own self-love (Christianity.com, 2019). Another example of the Christian Bible addressing food comes from Phillipians 3:19 (New International Version), where Paul the Apostle wrote "Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things." Expert commentary notes that this passage alludes to the condemning of people who are slaves to the desires of their body, providing the example of deifying the wants of their stomachs (Piper, 2021).

Other themes in the Bible regarding food are fasting and caring for the body. Acknowledging the doctrine most 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); however, the Southern region of the United States, despite its religious reputation, has developed a high rate of obesity. In 2019, The Associated Press released an article sharing that the southern states of Mississippi, West Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee,

Kentucky, South Carolina, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Alabama respectively fill the top spots on the list for the worst obesity rates in the nation. Obesity, which is described 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.

Furthermore, the obesity rates in the South demand a re-evaluation of nutrition education programs. A study released by the USDA (2013) provided clear evidence that well-designed nutrition education programs can reduce obesity by leading students to healthier and more informed food choices. However, with K-12 students in the United States receiving less than eight hours of nutrition education each school year (CDC, 2015), even though studies show that 40 to 50 hours are needed to affect behaviors (Connell, 1985), it is clear that nutrition education curricula need constant improvement in order to see effectiveness in a tested subject-based education system. According to the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE), understanding and integrating the background of these students into a more effective educational strategy is crucial to developing a productive and engaging curriculum for education and extension programs (Roberts et al., 2016).

Statement of the Problem

A thorough exploration of the dissonance, or inconsistency, between the eating habits and beliefs of Christians in the South is needed to help better prepare professionals who communicate about food and nutrition to consumers. Messaging associated with nutrition education, agricultural education, and food marketing should be guided by empirical research on audiences. According to the AAAE, when pursuing a goal of meaningful and engaged learning environments, it should be a priority to examine the role of diversity and multiple perspectives across different contexts (Roberts et al., 2016). Before communicators can develop effective

messages, they must first understand why other messages have not been impactful in the past. Obviously in the case of the “Bible Belt,” understanding simple demographics is not enough to produce effective communication, as more than 30 percent of adults in the South are obese, according to the CDC (2020), yet Pew Research Center reported in 2020 that 76 percent of adults in the South are Christians. Therefore, communicators need to understand their audience through more than just religious stereotypes in order to be truly effective. Furthermore, understanding the reasoning behind the eating habits of those in the South is crucial to developing more meaningful nutrition education programming for both the classroom and extension setting.

Purpose and Research Questions

Religion’s impact (or lack thereof) on eating habits and body weight is an important issue for modern societies, but research on this topic has been described as limited (Cline & Ferraro, 2006). Though Cline and Ferraro’s study was 15 years ago, there has been little research furthered since their project. With a lack of understanding and lack of research on this topic, communicators find a gap in knowledge that is necessary to fill in order to effectively market food products and educate consumers in the Bible Belt about human nutrition. This research is intended to initiate understanding of how obesity in the South is still so prevalent 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 and educators 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. What is the level of awareness among Christians in the South of the dissonance between their eating habits and their knowledge of nutrition and health topics in Biblical teachings?
5. If Christians in the South are aware of the dissonance, how do they feel about it and how do they reconcile it in their personal lives?

Limitations

The limitations to this qualitative study included the researcher's presence, the bias of the researcher, and the qualities of the study that cannot be generalized. 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. Because this type of research can bring about influence and bias, the researcher must be transparent and open to the subjectivity of the project (Grandy, 2018).

The study focused on an aspect of a much larger industry effort to educate and market to consumers about nutrition and health. Content presented is not a holistic, encompassing representation of the Southern region of the United States. This study was focused on a specific geographic area employed purposively selected subjects; therefore, the findings may not be generalizable outside of this group of subjects. Although the definition of the South consists of many more, this study only consisted of participants from Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Tennessee. However, other researchers are encouraged to expand upon themes identified in this study and use them as they see fit.

This study relied upon respondent self-reported behavior, which may be less reliable than direct observation (Owen et al. 2010; Coffey & Joseph, 2013; Kormos & Gifford, 2014).

Furthermore, the researcher's presence during data gathering, which is often unavoidable in qualitative research, could have affected the subjects' responses, and subjects' concerns about anonymity and confidentiality could have affected their ability to respond honestly to interview questions (Allen, 2017).

The study also was constrained by time, as this project was done in partial fulfillment of an 18-month master's degree and was designed to be completed in that time frame.

Assumptions

The study worked with the assumption that the theory of cognitive dissonance applies in the context of Christians in the South and their health habits. Furthermore, the data were collected by interviews, so it was assumed that subjects answered all questions truthfully, even though some of the questions may have been difficult to answer honestly because of their recognition of existing dissonance.

Definitions of Key Terms

1. Obesity refers to abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health. A body mass index (BMI) over 25 is considered overweight, and over 30 is obese (WHO, 2021).
2. Christianity is defined by Merriam- Webster (n.d.) as “the religion derived from Jesus Christ, based on the Bible as sacred scripture, and professed by Eastern, Roman Catholic, and Protestant bodies.”
3. Evangelical Protestant Christianity has a classic definition deriving from David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1930s* (1989). Bebbington's four-part definition of "evangelical" includes denominations of Christianity that emphasize "conversionism" (the need to be born again and to live a

transformed life), "activism" (engagement in missionary activity), "biblicism" (regarding the Bible as highest authority), and "crucicentrism" (the focus on the death of Jesus Christ as payment for penalty of sin).

4. The Bible Belt refers to an area of the United States where evangelical Protestantism plays an especially strong role in society in politics. This includes Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and parts of Texas and Florida (Abadi & Gal, 2018).
5. The south/ southern United States 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.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Conceptual Framework

This chapter discusses key topics that must be understood for the context of this study. Obesity in the South is a clear problem that is increasing each year (CDC, 2020), and there is much literature to discuss the different aspects of that. For example, there are a variety of studies featuring the most obese states in the United States, as well as research regarding the economic, emotional, and physical impacts that obesity can burden people with. For the purposes of this study, specific denominations of Christianity to which subjects subscribed are identified in this section as well. It is also important to study the dissonance, or inconsistency, between religious beliefs and lifestyles by examining literature regarding relationships between religion and health and obesity, as well as what the Bible says regarding obesity and food. Furthermore, one of the purposes of this study was to inform marketing communication efforts related to food and nutrition, so topics in the literature related to marketing tactics in the South and their impacts, which often includes faith-based marketing, and guilt marketing helped provide context for this study. It is also crucial to understand how people in the South are educated about health and nutrition. This includes food industry efforts, as well as attempts in the classroom. Finally, understanding the theory of Cognitive Dissonance brings clarity to the consumer behaviors that were examined in this study.

Obesity in the South

Most Obese States

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). 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 the seventeen states considered to be the region of the South, only Florida and the District of Columbia fall below a 30% obesity rate (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2020). Of the top ten most obese states, the top nine spots on the list belong to the South (Hubbard, 2020). The CDC reported that in 2019, nine states (Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia) in the South have more than 35% of the population self-reporting obesity. In other words, more than 1 in 3 adults in these southern states are battling obesity, and the numbers are increasing each year (CDC, 2020).

Economic Impacts of Obesity

The increasing prevalence of obesity is associated with both direct and indirect costs. Direct health care costs refer to preventive, diagnostic, and treatment services related to obesity, like physician visits, hospital bills, and nursing home care (Wolf, 1998). Indirect costs refer to the value of wages lost by people unable to work because of illness or disability, transportation costs of medical visits, as well as the value of future earnings lost by premature death, etc. (Wolf, 1998). The financial toll of obesity on health-care systems is between 2 and 7 percent of all health-care spending in developed economies, and that does not include the large cost of treating associated diseases, which adds up to 20 percent by some estimates (Dobbs et al., 2014). In 2014, the global economic impact of obesity was estimated to be \$2.0 trillion or 2.8% of the global gross domestic product (GDP) (Dobbs et al., 2014). In 2008, obesity-related medical care costs in the United States were an estimated \$147 billion. Annual nationwide productivity costs of obesity-related absenteeism ranged between \$3.38 billion (\$79 per obese individual) and \$6.38 billion (\$132 per individual with obesity) (Trogdon, 2008). While this source seems

outdated, the CDC still features it as a relevant study when discussing the economic impacts of obesity in the United States (2020).

Health Impacts of Obesity

Animal and human studies have indicated that an unhealthy diet can contribute to the development of many diseases, like cardiovascular disease and cancer, and can even affect the brain (Walker, 2015). In fact, research has shown that excess body fat increases risks for several cancers, including colorectal, post-menopausal breast, uterine, esophageal, kidney and pancreatic cancers (Underferth, 2020). Furthermore, the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery said that obese people are about ten times more likely to have Type Two Diabetes, which can almost double the risk of death. Furthermore, the World Health Organization said that people who are overweight and obese are linked to more deaths worldwide than underweight (2017).

Emotional Impacts of Obesity

Studies have shown that unhealthy diets affect the brain as well as the body. Diets high in saturated fats and refined carbohydrates are associated with greater incidences of depression, depressive symptoms, and anxiety (Pasco et al., 2010). On the other hand, there is also a weight-based stigma that overweight and obese people carry. According to the World Health Organization, the obesity stigma is associated with significant physiological and psychological consequences, including increased depression, anxiety and decreased self-esteem. It can also lead to disordered eating, avoidance of physical activity and avoidance of medical care (2017). Studies show that children struggling with obesity are 63% more likely to be bullied. Some obese adults experience psychological stress when they hear their peers over-simplify the causes of obesity, implying that easy solutions will lead to quick and sustainable results. When obese

people hear, “eat less, be more active,” they feel shamed by weight biases and pressured by unrealistic expectations, causing increase in mental health problems like anxiety and depression (World Health Organization, 2017).

Perceptions of Food and Consumption Decisions

The Purpose of Food in the United States

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), food provides nutrients, which are necessary for human growth, energy for activity, and all bodily functions (n.d.). However, new studies show that the evolution of culture has transformed the purposes of food from just nutrition into a social vehicle (Rozin, 2006). Interestingly, a study comparing U.S. eating habits to those of French eating habits found that Americans often focus more on the food consumed, while the French considered dining as an experience. In fact, the average eating time in France was 22.3 minutes, while the American average was only 13.2 minutes (Rozin, 2003).

Understanding Food Consumption Decisions

The process by which consumers make choices regarding their foods is influenced by personal, contextual, food-related factors, and personal interactions (Köster, 2009, Sobal et al., 2006). It is crucial to understand consumers’ decision-making in foods in order to excel in strategic marketing communications, effective educational curricula, and quality food product presentation (Lagerkvist, 2013). According to the Total Food Quality Model (Grunert et. Al, 1996), sensory, health, convenience, and process-related variables play a part in consumers’ perceptions of food quality and desirability. However, recent studies have shown that even visually-appealing nutrition labels that prove to gain more attention by consumers do not increase the likelihood of healthy food choices (Fenko et al., 2018). As a result, Fenko (2018)

suggested that current marketing tactics may not be capable of influencing eating habits, which is why new tactics in both communications and education must be developed.

Religion in the South

Types of Protestant Christianity in the South

According to the Oxford Research Encyclopedias, the South is considered to be heavily populated by evangelical protestants (Harvey, 2015). In protestant Christianity, a divide has developed in which some protestant churches lean toward a more conservative approach (evangelical), while others choose a more liberal stance on the Bible (mainline). Mainline Protestant churches preach that the Bible is God's word in function, but the churches are still open to new ideas and societal changes which may not coexist with scripture (Diamond, 2009). However, Evangelical Protestant Christianity is much more concerned with Biblical authority and less with societal influences (Eskridge, 1995). The classic definition derives from David Bebbington, in *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1930s* (1989). Bebbington's four-part definition of "evangelical" includes denominations of Christianity that emphasize "conversionism" (the need to be born again and to live a transformed life), "activism" (engagement in missionary activity), "biblicism" (regarding the Bible as highest authority), and "crucicentrism" (the focus on the death of Jesus Christ as payment for penalty of sin). So, with the south heavily identifying as evangelical (Harvey, 2015), it is important to note that these specific denominations are those which should be most understood for the purposes of this study. The denominations of the Evangelical Protestant Church are Baptist, Church of Christ, Methodist, Pentecostal, Plymouth Brethren, Reformed (Calvinist), and nondenominational (Stiller, 2015).

Dissonance between Beliefs and Lifestyles

Religion and Health

Ellison and Levin's (1998) study showed that most researchers find a positive relationship between religion and health. For example, they found that people who regularly attend church, pray, or read the Bible statistically have lower blood pressure than less religious people. Also, religious people are hospitalized less often and are less likely to suffer from depression. Furthermore, religious people are more likely to have healthier lifestyles, a stronger sense of well-being and life satisfaction, stronger immune systems, and longevity (Koenig, 2001). According to Cline and Ferraro (2006), most religions condemn overeating and gluttony, but there is little research to support a conclusion about actual behavior. In fact, they revealed that several studies show that some religious groups have higher rates of overweight and obesity.

Religion and Obesity

In a study by Kim, Sobal, and Wethington (2003), it was 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. However, Mormons and Seventh Day Adventists stress health protective behaviors and have lower rates of obesity. Furthermore, the 2006 study by Cline and Ferraro concluded that Baptists have a higher rate of obesity, with other Protestant denominations not far behind.

The obesity rates among Protestants can be traced back to the deep-rooted food culture in U.S. religions. 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. He claimed that the denomination gives low priority to characterizations of excess dietary consumption as immoral, and instead emphasizes the condemnation of “more sinful” habits, such as drinking or smoking. It was suggested that this creates an “accepted vice” (Cline & Ferraro, 2006). Furthermore, Cline and Ferraro concluded that some people use smoking as an appetite suppressant, and, when churches discourage the use of alcohol and tobacco, they decrease the likelihood of smoking, therefore inadvertently leading to a higher obesity rate (2006).

The views that churches have on physical health and exercise are also relevant. Some religious groups consider exercise as unimportant to health maintenance because one should focus on spiritual matters, while others extend the “temple of the Holy Spirit” assertion to physical health and fitness (Cline & Ferraro, 2006).

The Bible on Overeating

John Piper, a well-known and trusted theologian and recently-named one of the top 12 most effective preachers by a Baylor University (2018) study, defined the obesity problem in the church not as a weight problem, but an overeating problem. While he recognized that there are other possible reasons for obesity, like genetics or disorders, he specifically addressed gluttony as the wide-spread issue that is in dissonance with the Bible. He described gluttony as “having a craving for food that conquers you,” (Piper, 2008). In 1 Corinthians 6:12, the author, Paul, is specifically discussing food and drink, and says, “...but I will not be mastered by anything,” (New International Version). On the topic of this scripture, Piper wrote, “I think we need to recover a large appreciation for the biblical disciplines of self-denial and fasting.” He went on to conclude that many Christians are not upholding the calling of the Church to deny cravings

(Piper, 2008). Furthermore, he referenced many other Bible verses to explain why Christians are meant to behave in such a way. Piper declared that Christians are meant to “need” only one thing- God. He argued that food cravings are not meant to simply be told “no” but to be offered an alternative “yes” (2008). The following scriptures are examples of Piper’s references.

- "Taste and see that the Lord is good." (Psalm 34:8)
- "Desire the sincere spiritual milk of the word." (1 Peter 2:2)
- "I am the bread of life. Come to me and you will not hunger." (John 6:35)
- "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food." (Isaiah 55:1-2)

In his conclusion, Piper wrote that those of the Christian faith should only have one “master,” and being satisfied with spiritual bread, wine, and milk will cause physical hunger to lose its supreme power (2008). Furthermore, he challenged that Christians should cultivate a range of appetites for great and good things, things like good literature, people's fellowship, reading the Bible, nature, work, and that discovering these other appetites is desirable so that things other than food can satisfy.

The Bible on Food

1 Timothy 4:4-5 says, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer” (English Standard Version). Referencing this passage, Piper argued that the author, Paul, is talking about food and sex. Furthermore, he posited that food is God’s creation and idea,

including both nutritional value and taste (Piper, 2014). Another commentary referenced Ecclesiastes 2:24, “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God...” However, it emphasized that, as with any good blessing, there is a way to use it in excess that can hinder people spiritually (Harp, 2018).

Christians do believe that food can be, and is, good when used wisely. A Biblically-rooted tradition of the church is Communion, in which Christians worship by sharing bread and wine. When Christians have an understanding of communion, they can move forward with an understanding that food was created to remind Christians that food is not an end in itself, but is meant to teach them of their soul’s need for Christ (Bowers, 2015). When interpreting 1 Corinthians 6:12–13, Piper (2014) said that food is lawful, but not as a master. Moreover, he noted, as soon as food moves away from being a servant, satisfying appropriate hungers, sending thrills of thanksgiving to God, and reminding that God tastes even better than anything that was eaten, it starts to become a master. Paul wrote in these verses of 1 Corinthians not to be mastered by anything, especially food. Christian doctrine declares that the Lord is for the body. He is not against food, which is why he does not want people to be mastered, or controlled, by anything but Himself (Piper, 2014).

Science and Secular Beliefs on Health, Obesity, and Food

Aside from religious beliefs, the general public in the United States believes that science holds the answers to understanding health and how to maintain it (USDA, 2020). According to the USDA, a scientific connection between food and health has been well documented for many decades. Science argues that healthy diet habits can help people achieve and maintain good health and reduce the risk of chronic diseases throughout all stages of life. In recent years,

researchers, public health experts, and registered dietitians have come together to develop the USDA Dietary Guidelines in an effort to promote health and reduce chronic disease risk, and these guidelines have become one of the most trusted sources for understanding American health and nutrition (USDA, 2020). Furthermore, the document is re-evaluated and improved every five years, in accordance with new science, technology, and research.

In the 2020-2025 edition of the USDA Dietary Guidelines, it was suggested that it is critical for adults to follow a healthy dietary pattern, engage in regular physical activity, and manage body weight. Scientists suggested that adults need at least 150 to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity each week. They also noted that Americans are at a much higher risk of chronic diseases than the rest of the world, so adults should pursue healthy lifestyles, rather than short-term weight loss solutions. To do this, adults should reduce the number of calories that they eat or drink and increase the number of calories they expend through physical activity. Furthermore, adults were encouraged to follow the recommendations on the types of foods and beverages that make up a healthy dietary pattern. This typically means choosing nutrient-dense food options, being mindful of portion sizes, and selecting foods from various food groups. However, it was noted that each person should select dietary choices based on personal calorie needs. Females ages 19 through 30 require about 1,800 to 2,400 calories a day. Males in this age group have higher calorie needs of about 2,400 to 3,000 a day. Calorie needs for adults ages 31 through 59 are generally lower; most females require about 1,600 to 2,200 calories a day and males require about 2,200 to 3,000 calories a day. Level of physical activity, body composition, and the presence of chronic disease are additional factors that affect calorie needs (USDA, 2020).

Food and Nutrition Marketing in the South

Marketing Tactics

Southern consumers can be difficult to reach because they don't respond to the types of communication that their counterparts in other states (Simplemachine Marketing, 2016). Deenie Hartzog is a Southern native and successful marketing professional, having worked as a former advertising copy director at *Vogue*, current copywriter at *Bon Appétit* and fashion copywriter at Bloomingdales.com. When asked about marketing in the Southern U.S., Hartzog said that in order to speak directly to the people of the south, a brand will need to develop a deep, almost personal relationship with consumers (Simplemachine Marketing, 2016). Hartzog said, "As a whole, I don't think the south is quite ready to be sold on some of the more provocative campaigns out there." As an example, she gave the New York City Department of Health subway advertisement that discourages the consumption of soft drinks. Soda is being poured into a glass, which is overflowing with yellow, bubbling fat, shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. New York City Department of Health & Mental Hygiene ad.

Note: Lisberg, A. (2019, January 11). *Controversial new subway billboards show human fat being poured out of soft drink bottles.* *New York Daily News.*

[https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/controversial-new-subway-billboards-show-human-fat-poured-soft-drink-bottles-article-1.397283.](https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/controversial-new-subway-billboards-show-human-fat-poured-soft-drink-bottles-article-1.397283)

“It’s disgusting,” Hartzog says, “But New Yorkers can handle it because aggression is all around. Southerners would never be so forceful; they’d never dare take the chance at offending someone with such a grotesque visual,” (SimpleMachine Marketing, para. 6, 2016).

According to *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 16: Sports and Recreation* (Wilson, 2014), there is a much higher rate of outdoor activities, 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. The publication stated that all evidence 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.

Guilt Appeal Marketing

In the world of marketing, there has been an increasing amount of guilt appeal, which is an emotional tactic to incite changed behavior through guilt in the consumers. The iconic example of this is the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) commercials featuring Sarah McLaughlin and many abused pets. Other examples of this type of marketing are attempts at selling more environmentally friendly products or healthy options. However, in this relatively new method of advertising, many marketers are struggling to recognize the difference between guilt appeals and shame appeals (Pounders et al., 2017). In this realm of persuasion, it is crucial to differentiate the two emotional appeals. A 2017 study showed that light feelings of guilt often lead to positive outcomes, but feelings of shame resulted in avoidance of the message, feelings, or call to action. However, there is much evidence to indicate that marketers are struggling with where guilt turns to shame, resulting in the message being too emotionally intense for viewers (Pounders, et al., 2017). Furthermore, according to a 2017 study, guilt marketing campaigns can encourage negative attitudes and even anger. In fact, the researchers concluded that commercial marketers may want to avoid using high-intensity levels of guilt in their messages, or even avoid the use of guilt altogether, as the messages produced angry responses in viewers. As a result, the messages and products were dismissed completely in many cases (Turner et al., 2017).

Faith-Based Marketing

Religion is more widely practiced in the United States than in any other industrialized nation in the world. Statistics have revealed that 70% of Americans identify themselves as Christian (Public Religion Research Institute, 2021). Furthermore, 36 percent of Americans attend a religious service on a weekly basis while more than 90% claim to believe in a higher power (Harris Interactive, 2003). Moreover, seven out of ten Americans strongly assert that their religious faith is very important in their life (Barna Group, 2006). According to the Pew Global Attitudes Project, there is no other country in the industrialized world in which religion plays such an important role in people's lives (2002). So, it is clear that religion should be included in marketing tactics as Americans defy what industrialization implies for all other countries. For example, companies have begun avoiding marketing pork products to Jews and Muslims due to kosher and halal religious laws (Mathras et al, 2016). This is just one way that marketers have found success in understanding and including religion in their communication tactics.

In some cases, marketing in ways that defy religious beliefs or laws can actually be damaging to a company or campaign. In Christian religions, the Ten Commandments enforce a strong base for ethics (Parboteeah et al, 2007). Christian and Islamic ethics both examine marketing with respect (Viita, 2017). Both try to make sense of the world of commerce within the boundaries of their faiths. It is a Christian's responsibility to ensure that the good or service gives real value to the buyer (Gibbs et al, 2008). Therefore, some religious people may take offense when marketing tactics evade their religious doctrine.

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 one of their campaigns. It did not take very long to change it back in order to save the reputation of the company (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, or the “Lord’s 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. The study confirmed that religion should be considered when developing advertisements in a highly religious community (Viita, 2017).

Furthermore, Kuhn (2011) argued that online behavior reveals that people don’t define themselves demographically, and that the modern digital era moved marketers beyond demographics by letting them glimpse people’s beliefs, passions and interests according to their behavior online. These characteristics predict behavior much more accurately. He said that beliefs drive behavior and Christians are the largest belief group in the world and in the United States. As marketers stop relying on outdated demographics and begin to monitor belief instead, they will recognize the value of faith-based marketing (Kuhn, 2011). So, as this type of marketing becomes more prevalent, it is necessary to also understand the ways that beliefs can stereotype a population, or it will just become another demographic that people don’t feel defines them. This can lead to failed marketing attempts if communicators do not carefully study and understand the consumers they are trying to reach in the realm of faith-based marketing (Hamilton, 2016).

Nutrition Education in the South

The Efforts of the Food Service Industry

In 2018, the Food & Drug Administration implemented a requirement that all restaurants and food retail establishments had to include nutrition labeling on all menus and menu boards. According to the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Americans should have clear information regarding the caloric value of each menu item, and, if requested, restaurants are required to disclose the total calories, total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium, total carbohydrates, sugars, fiber, and protein (2020). However, despite much effort from the food industry to inform consumers on nutritional information regarding their products, many consumers are not or do not want to be convinced that healthy eating habits are needed (Dipietro et al., 2006). In fact, a 2011 study in Alabama revealed that most people care more about the aspect of convenience (not wanting to cook, not having time to cook) than to eat healthily (Alonso, 2011).

Educating the Consumer

Since the implementation of the 1990 Nutrition Labeling and Education Act, many studies have highlighted the necessity of nutrition education to fight obesity and other diet-related health issues, which are correlated with individuals who use nutrition labels. Education and nutrition knowledge are associated with label use and understanding. Consumers with higher levels of education and nutrition knowledge, are typically able to comprehend labels and compare foods using labels easier than others (Dumoitier et al., 2019).

In a study by Ellison (2013), researchers evaluated food choices in a sit-down restaurant where customers were randomized to a menu-labeling treatment. Two label treatments provided customers with calorie information (one with the number of calories and one that used symbols

to communicate calorie content), and a control menu that did not provide any information about calorie content. While both label treatments influenced food choice, effectiveness of a menu label varied based on the level of knowledge consumers had about nutrition. Thus, the study concluded that before nutrition labels can be effective, consumers need a strong base knowledge of nutrition.

Nutrition Education for the Consumer

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) education is an evidence-based program that seeks to aid adults in making decisions that lead to healthy and active lifestyles (SNAP, 2021). This program provides funding to states to implement nutrition education interventions designed to help families make healthy choices. While the USDA recognizes that no one idea can solve the problems of poor dieting and obesity rates, this program continues to seek and implement solutions to encourage the purchasing and consumption of healthy foods. In fact, in a study done by the Food and Nutrition Service of the USDA, reports showed that well-designed nutrition education programs lead to healthier eating choices (USDA, 2013). Adults who participated in the (SNAP) program were given take-home materials which, when completed, resulted in participants adopting healthier behaviors. These adults were also much more open in discussing the challenges of purchasing, preparing, and consuming fruits and vegetables on a budget (USDA, 2013).

Nutrition Education in the Classroom

Students in the United States receive less than eight hours of nutrition education each school year (CDC, 2015), yet studies show that 40 to 50 hours are needed to affect behaviors (Connell, 1985). Schools place more emphasis on tested subjects, so many educators resort to only including nutrition education when it aligns with existing schedules (Food and Nutrition

Board, 2014). The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-296) called for local wellness policies that include goals for nutrition education, physical activity, and other school-based activities that promote student wellness, in addition to school-based nutrition guidelines to promote student health and reduce childhood obesity. The act also required that local wellness policies include goals for nutrition promotion (USDA, 2019).

According to Norris Dickard, who directs the Healthy Students Group at the U.S. Department of Education, the nation has reached a tipping point on issues involving healthy eating and wellness in schools. He said that nutrition education needs to be infused throughout the curriculum to capture the hearts and minds of students (Food and Nutrition Board, 2014). However, the education department is prohibited by statute 20, section 1232a of the United States Code from exercising “any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel of any educational institution, school or school system, or over the selection of library resources, textbooks, or other printed or published instructional materials” (General Education Provisions Act, 1976). It can only provide program and curriculum models that teachers and administrators can choose to use and adapt. However, teachers often already feel so pressured to teach above and beyond their curriculum, so it is difficult to persuade educators to include more programming with no incentives (Food and Nutrition Board, 2014).

Furthermore, previous literature argues that effective teachers use the knowledge of their students, like cultural backgrounds and personal interests, in order to make decisions on how to teach and what to teach (Stronge, 2018). The American Association for Agricultural Education’s needs-based and studies-based organizational research agendas shows that when pursuing a goal of meaningful and engaged learning environments, it should be a priority of educators to

examine the role of diversity and multiple perspectives across different contexts (Roberts et al., 2016).

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Cognitive Dissonance Theory, developed by Leon Festinger. This theory suggests that when two cognitive elements, such as attitudes, perceptions, knowledge, and beliefs, are relevant but inconsistent, a state of discomfort, or dissonance, is created. Furthermore, Festinger's (1957) theory suggests that people have an inner drive to hold all attitudes and behavior in harmony and avoid disharmony (or dissonance). This means that, according to Festinger, humans are motivated to reduce inconsistency by altering some part of the cognitive system, which can be observed in Figure 1. This altering of the system often results in changing of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, or by justifying or rationalizing them (Festinger, 1957).

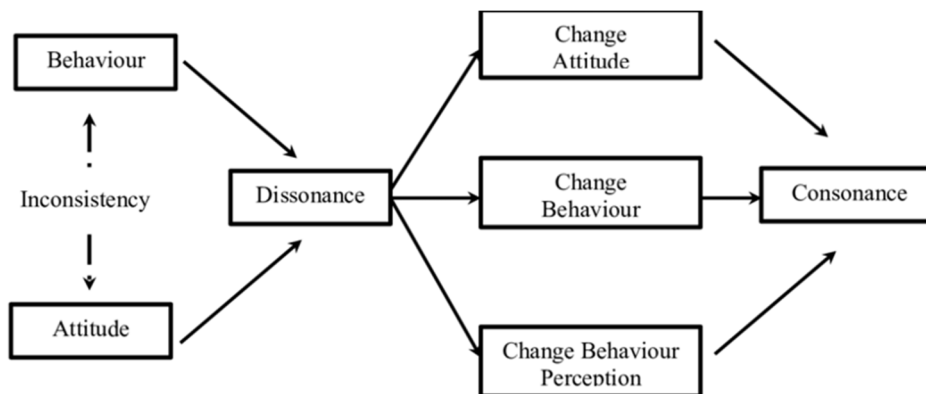


Figure 2

Model of Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Note: This model illustrates the path of predictions used to determine subject behavior and future behavior when inconsistency arises among cognitive elements. From “A Framework for Analysing, Designing and Evaluating Persuasive Technologies,” by Wiafe, 2012, adapted from Festinger (1957). Wiafe, I. (2012, September). A Framework for Analysing, Designing and Evaluating Persuasive Technologies.

https://www.academia.edu/10613331/A_Framework_for_Analysing_Designing_and_Evaluating_Persuasive_Technologies.

The Cognitive Dissonance Theory places emphasis on three possible relationships that exist between attitude and behavior. These are: irrelevance, consonance and dissonance. It argues that influence is mostly intrapersonal when incongruence exists between attitude and behavior (Wiafe, 2012). When in a state of discomfort, consumers will use one of three modes to reduce the dissonance suggested by Festinger. These three modes are seeking constant information, attitude change and trivializing (Lindsey-Mullikin, 2003).

An example of the application of this theory in marketing is Lindsey-Mullikin's (2003) study, which showed that when consumers experienced unexpected prices, they adopted one of the three methods of reducing the dissonance. If the consumer chose to seek constant information, they tended to search in biased and filtered ways for information that will support their prior belief. For example, they searched for information about other retailers and substituted products that were consistent with their state. However, in the second mode of reducing the dissonance (change of attitude), consumers who encountered the unexpected price tended to re-evaluate the price in relation to the external reference prices. According to the study, the third option to reduce dissonance, trivialization, occurred when the importance of the elements of the dissonant relationship is reduced. In the context of the study of Lindsey-Mullikin (2003), consumers tended to trivialize the importance of money, shopping around savings and receiving a good deal.

For the purpose 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 the framework for understanding the methods by which the participants of the study pursued consonance between their attitudes and actions. In this study, this theoretical framework 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, Christians in the South find themselves in a dissonance. In order to resolve this dissonance, they can change their attitudes, behaviors, or perceptions of their behaviors. In other words, Christians in the South can take a few different approaches to reconcile their beliefs and actions. 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 Biblical beliefs. However, the final option could be a change in behavior perception. In this case, these Christians could either find scripture in their Bible to try to validate their eating habits or otherwise convince themselves that their habits are not unhealthy, and therefore are not a problem. Finally, there could be a combination of the three in an attempt to rationalize the inconsistencies and regain cognitive harmony. Regardless of the change they choose to pursue, all three are methods explained by Festinger (1957) to accomplish consonance, or reconciliation between behavior and attitude. By using the Cognitive Dissonance theory as a framework, this study revealed unique information about consumer behavior in the Bible Belt.

Conclusion

Key concepts in the literature guiding this study include obesity in the South and religious beliefs versus the actions of religious people. Furthermore, it is also helpful to understand current marketing strategies and nutrition education in the Bible Belt. This study can be understood through the lens of the Cognitive Dissonance theory because it provides an explanation for how consumers react when they realize a dissonance in their lives. These reactions could be either changed beliefs, changed actions, or changed perceptions of their

behavior. All in all, the literature provided in this chapter give proper context for understanding the basis of this study.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Restatement of the Problem

A thorough exploration of the dissonance, or inconsistency, between the eating habits and beliefs of Christians in the South is needed to help better prepare professionals who communicate about food and nutrition to consumers. Messaging associated with nutrition education, agricultural education, and food marketing should be guided by empirical research on audiences. According to the AAAE, when pursuing a goal of meaningful and engaged learning environments, it should be a priority to examine the role of diversity and multiple perspectives across different contexts (Roberts et al., 2016). Before communicators can develop effective messages, they must first understand why other messages have not been impactful in the past. Obviously in the case of the “Bible Belt,” understanding simple demographics is not enough to produce effective communication, as more than 30 percent of adults in the South are obese, according to the CDC (2020), yet Pew Research Center reported in 2020 that 76 percent of adults in the South are Christians. Therefore, communicators need to understand their audience through more than just religious stereotypes in order to be truly effective. Furthermore, understanding the reasoning behind the eating habits of those in the south is crucial to developing a more meaningful nutrition education program for both the classroom and extension settings.

Purpose and Research Questions

Religion’s impact (or lack thereof) on eating habits and body weight is an important issue for modern societies, but research on this topic has been described as limited (Cline & Ferraro, 2006). Though Cline and Ferraro’s study was 15 years ago, there has been little research furthered since their project. With a lack of understanding and lack of research on this topic, communicators find a gap in knowledge that is necessary to fill in order to effectively market

food products and educate consumers in the Bible Belt about human nutrition. This research is intended to initiate understanding of how obesity in the South is still so prevalent 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 and educators 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. What is the level of awareness among Christians in the South of the dissonance between their eating habits and their knowledge of nutrition and health topics in Biblical teachings?
5. If Christians in the South are aware of the dissonance, how do they feel about it and how do they reconcile it in their personal lives?

Design of the Study

This was a qualitative, descriptive study with a phenomenological approach. The goal of descriptive research was to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics. This method was chosen because of the complex nature of understanding experiences of Christians in the South. To uncover the complexity of this topic, it was necessary to not only examine how behaviors are developed in general or what factors affect them, but also provide more in-depth examination and understanding of individuals and their behaviors and experiences. Because this study only

sought to understand a phenomenon in the Bible Belt, a qualitative, descriptive 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).

The study employed semi-structured field interviews as a data collection method. This interview approach allowed the researcher to gather descriptive answers to the research questions that were supported by the feelings and actions of the participants. Semi-structured interviews were also selected because this format allowed the interviewer to follow a systematic guide of developed questions, but also provided the freedom to ask other relevant questions that emerged during the interview process (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). After the systematic, planned questions were asked, the researcher used probing questions to seek deeper responses from respondents' initial comments and provide deeper, richer data that led to thematic conclusions (Turner, 2017). At the conclusion of the interviews, the researcher interpreted the data by identifying recurring themes, patterns, or concepts and then describing and translating those categories (Huberman & Miles, 2009). Techniques including prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, referential adequacy, and member checks were used in an approach to achieving credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability.

Subjects

Participant Selection

Creswell and Creswell (2018) discussed the importance of selecting the appropriate subjects for interviews. Creswell also emphasized the importance of choosing participants who will be willing to openly and honestly share information. For this study, the participants all

needed to be self-identified Christians who are residents of the southern states. For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that only denominations which conservatively follow the Bible, identified as evangelical protestant Christians, were evaluated. Any denomination that believes in the fluidity of Christian scripture were not relevant, as their foundations for truth could not accurately be identified. Only Christians that identified the Bible as true and authoritative could be selected and evaluated for the presence of cognitive dissonance, as the dissonance described could only be present between the participant and the Bible. Network recruiting (Patton, 2002) was the method used to purposefully select the participants for the study. In this method, key informants gave recommendations for participants, and the researcher expanded on those contacts. In qualitative research, the necessary sample size varies until the point of saturation is reached (Bernard & Gravlee, 2014). As the interviews progressed and themes became recurrent to the point of data saturation, the interviews stopped. The sample size is considered adequate when interviewing more subjects does not yield new information (Bernard & Gravlee, 2014). Time was also a restraint, as this research was done in partial fulfillment of a master's degree.

Demographics of the Subjects

The participants of this study were purposively selected to represent various demographics. The key demographics guiding subject selection for this study were the religious affiliations of the participants as well as their geographic location. Participants were representative of seven different states—Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Tennessee. Participants were representative of multiple denominations within Protestant Christianity in the Southern region of the United States. The group of participants were purposively selected to represent a cross-section of Protestant denominations in

the south. This included Baptist, Methodist, Church of Christ, Pentecostal, and nondenominational participants. Age was also a consideration, as this study is concerned with adults. So, the intended age range for this study was 18-100. However, the participants were divided into age ranges. Participants from ages 18-22 were in a group, as this is the general age range of most college students. A group of young adults was also represented in participants ranging in age from 23-30. A group of participants aging 31-55 were also represented, as well as a group of 56-100, which represented the oldest groups in the south for this study. Gender was also considered in order to maintain a relatively balanced sample.

Network Recruiting

Network recruiting was used to purposefully select the participants of the study. The researcher contacted key informants from various churches in multiple southern states, and that informant provided suggested participants for the study. This resulted in a participant pool with variety in location (seven different states), denomination, and other demographics. According to Patton (2002), this method is helpful for generating a large number of information-rich cases. In doing this, the researcher was able to identify qualities of participants that were favorable for the purposes of the study. A unique collection of subjects was thus created in order to more accurately describe the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2009).

Human Subjects Protection

Subjects participating in this study were protected from harm of any kind as a result of a protocol review by the University of Arkansas Internal Review Board (IRB# 2104330280). Identifying information collected from subjects was protected through anonymization regarding names, organizations, and locations.

Instrumentation

Instrument Development (Semi-Structured Questioning Route)

The development of the interview questions was guided by the objectives of the study, as well as the conceptual and theoretical ideas supporting the study. McNamara (2009) suggested that effective research questions for interviews should include the following elements: (1) open-ended wording; (2) neutral questions (wording that does not influence answers); (3) one question is asked at a time; (4) clearly worded questions (this includes knowing any terms particular to the program or the respondents' culture); and (5) careful use of "why" questions. Patton (2002) presented different categories of types of questions. These topics are (1) behaviors, or what a person has done or is doing; (2) opinions/values, referencing what a person thinks about a topic; (3) feelings, sometimes noted by responses beginning with "I think ..."; (4) knowledge, which is just facts about a topic; (5) sensory, or what people have seen, touched, heard, tasted or smelled, and finally; (6) background/demographics, including standard background questions, such as age and education.

Furthermore, McNamara (2009) suggested that the sequence of questions in the interview is also significant and should be ordered intentionally. He wrote that researchers should involve the participants in the interview as soon as possible. Furthermore, before the researcher asks about controversial matters (such as feelings and conclusions), questions of fact should be asked first. With this approach, respondents can more easily engage in the interview before dealing with questions on more personal matters. This was especially considered for this study, as questions were often difficult for respondents to be honest about. Participants needed time to get comfortable and trust the researcher first. To aid in addressing this problem even more, McNamara (2009) also suggested asking fact-based questions throughout the interview. This

helps avoid long lists of fact-based questions that can lead to a disengaged participant. Finally, he said that it is best to ask questions about the present before asking questions about the past or future. In the context of this study, this was important because some questions referred to future actions, beliefs, etc. Although there was some structure to the questions asked in the interview, the researcher also asked some follow-up questions after the initial thoughts were shared by the participants. The specific questioning route used with all participants can be found in Appendix B.

According to Merriam (2016), the instrument can also be the researcher. In fact, it is well-accepted that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis in qualitative investigations. In qualitative research, data are collected by the researcher using his or her five senses to collect, analyze, and interpret data. Because this type of research can often bring about emotions, either from the researcher or from the participants, the researcher serving as an instrument must embrace the subjectivity of the project (Grandy, 2018). This means that qualitative researchers recognize the value in these unique settings that produce high-quality qualitative results. So, rather than trying to hide the bias, as is common in quantitative research, qualitative research presents biases of the researcher very clearly to increase the research study's trustworthiness. This is done through the process of the researcher's reflexivity statement, which is the self-critical analysis of the researcher's bias, assumptions, background, expertise, as it pertains to the study (Gandy, 2018).

Pilot Study

Four individuals were interviewed in practice settings for the purpose of a pilot test. This assisted the researcher in determining if there were flaws, limitations, or other weaknesses within the interview design and allowed for necessary revisions prior to the implementation of the study

(Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The pilot test was conducted with participants who had similar beliefs as those who would participate in the actual study (Yin, 2014). Subjects were similar in likeness to the population of the study, including age, background, location, and religion. The pilot test also assisted the researcher with the refinement of research questions, which produced a more effective and clear interview structure. While no literature indicates a favored number of pilot tests, the researcher moved into data collection when the interviews began consistently producing the desired results (Yin, 2014). The researcher and mentors for the study began interviews with confidence that the methods would yield the intended product (Yin, 2014). After four pilot interviews, minimal changes were made to the instrumentation. The pilot study served in assisting the primary interviewer in developing effective technological choices and becoming accustomed to the Zoom software. When no changes needed to be made to the instrument, the researcher and mentors for the study determined that the data collection could begin.

Data Collection

Although traveling and meeting with participants face-to-face would have been ideal, concerns of a global pandemic and the spread of COVID-19 as well as the geographical spread of participants made virtual meetings to be the most practical and preferred method among participants. The interviews occurred through Zoom meetings, which provided many benefits (Archibald, 2019). Neither the participants nor the researcher had to travel for interviews, which allowed for a much wider geographic population. Zoom was also considered an extremely useful tool for data collection because of the convenience, cost-effectiveness, data management features, and user-friendliness (Archibald, 2019). The interviews were about 20-30 minutes long and were guided by a semi-structured system of questions. Participants were all asked the same core questions, and then the researcher asked probing questions as needed. Probing questions by

the researcher were used to elicit more information following the initial answers. This allowed for a more in-depth and descriptive collection of data, which was the goal of this qualitative study. With follow-up questions, participants were given more opportunities to express their viewpoints and experiences (Turner, 2017).

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred after the transcription of each interview. Zoom automatically transcribed each interview, so revisions were made where needed to ensure accuracy. A thematic analysis was accomplished by using NVivo 11, a qualitative data analysis software. The researcher uploaded interview content into NVivo 11. Following successful uploads, the data was broken into units for analyzing and reporting.

This process involved the identification of themes, patterns, or concepts using the guidance of the developed instrument (Huberman & Miles, 2009). Emergent themes were identified and annotated using the software. Units of analysis included words, phrases, and sentences, and entire multiple-sentence responses. These coded excerpts were compiled to build support for the themes, and a taxonomy of themes was created by reorganizing the initial emergent themes into a rational order (Huberman & Miles, 2009). As the analysis progressed, the emergent themes and taxonomy were used in a constant-comparative approach to identify salient themes across all content.

The researcher sought to use content analysis as a method for making replicable and valid inferences from data with the purpose of providing knowledge, new insights, representation of facts and a practical guide to action (Krippendorff, 1980). The constant-comparative method was implemented to ensure emerging themes were constant across all content. In other words, the researcher identified similarities and differences in the data, and then made theme groups for the

data. As analysis continued, each new piece of data was compared and contrasted and sorted into the most relevant theme group. Once all data was reviewed, the researcher evaluated all groups in an attempt to identify patterns or themes to the data. This constant-comparative method also ensured that the researcher had flexibility to develop a theory inductively (Boeije, 2002). Glaser and Strauss (1967) explained that constant comparison is important in developing a theory that is grounded in the data. In this type of analysis, a theory is inductively created. In other words, this research did not begin with a theory, but rather a phenomenon to be studied and understood. Upon analyzing data that represented the phenomenon, the researcher developed a theory to describe the phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory were in a reciprocal relationship with each other (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Qualitative Rigor: Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Conformability

The researcher utilized techniques identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as “activities in the field that increase the probability of high credibility” (p. 328). These techniques included intercoder agreement, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, referential adequacy, and member checks.

During the analysis process, intercoder agreement (Guest et. al, 2012) was sought using data from pilot studies and early interviews. This signifies the extent to which the data analysts coded the same qualitative data set in the same way. The two analysts used the same codebook and independently applied codes to sections of the text. Then, the analysts compared their coding and noted where the coding matched and did not match (Guest et al, 2012). For this study, a percentage of agreement was established at 85.29 percent. This was calculated by dividing the total number of times the coding agreed by the total number of code comparisons (Guest et. al, 2012).

Prolonged engagement was achieved by the researcher investing time to achieve certain purposes: learning the “culture,” testing for misinformation introduced by distortions either of the self or the participants of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to establish a firm understanding of the doctrine of Christianity in the south, the researcher read extensively on the topics of health and religion, as well as met with religion and Christianity professors. Furthermore, the researcher spent extensive time in various churches in the South to become familiar with the culture, language, and gain insight regarding the topics of the study within the church. It is also important to note that the researcher spent three months analyzing the data.

In another attempt to achieve rigor, persistence effort was applied in selecting subjects for this study. Specific criteria were used when selecting all subjects who participated in this study. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that only subjects that fit this study were interviewed and included in the study.

An important part of this study was the use of triangulation, which is the use of multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Patton, 2002). To add triangulation to the study, the researcher used multiple data collection methods including personal interviews, field observations, and examination of documents. Data resulting from the field observations were used to triangulate findings that emerged from other data collection methods, which allowed the researcher to record behaviors and link them to claims and statements made by the participants regarding their perceptions and experiences. Open-ended questions and interviewing routes were designed to triangulate findings and insure internal validity. Field notes were also consistent with interview responses. This triangulation in methods added dependability to the study.

Field notes served to assist with triangulation. With the emergent themes from the interview responses in mind, the researcher developed a codebook (Roberts, 2018). The interpretation of the findings was presented in context with published denominational doctrine and expert commentary, which was examined in the literature review.

Realities of the phenomenon were measured based on multiple sources to help grasp reality and insure credibility. The researcher gathered experiences from each participant through interviews and collected field notes. There were also personal interviews with multiple outliers, such as Christians that do consider their doctrine when making eating decisions, leading to either healthy lifestyles or unhealthy eating disorders. This data was triangulated with all other interview transcripts to ensure accuracy in interpretation.

As Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested, the researcher participated in periodic peer debriefings with a peer researcher who was both knowledgeable “about both the substantive area of the inquiry and the methodological issues” (pp. 308-309). In these periodic meetings, the researcher shared and discussed progress made on the study and tested ideas on the debriefer. These meetings also ensured the honesty of the researcher and motivated the researcher to think deeper on the factors making up the study.

Informal member checks were conducted with a number of the subjects who participated in the personal interviews. Informal checking involved giving each subject an opportunity to correct misunderstandings, errors, and poor interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Copies of the results of the study were sent to each participant for review, and, with no objections from those subjects, the researcher deemed the interpretations of the interviews to be accurate perceptions of those interviews.

To ensure transferability, it is the responsibility of the researcher to provide a very detailed and full description of data, and to note biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the researcher provided a deep description that specified every detail needed to understand context and findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). 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).

NVivo 11 was used to analyze the data of this study and create an audit trail for referential adequacy. Following Halpern's audit trail categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), raw data and personal notes were synthesized and recorded in NVivo 11. To add dependability and conformability to the study, documented evidence supporting the logic of every emerging theme was also recorded and reported.

A committee of interested research colleagues from various practices approved all methods of this study. The same committee was involved with the review of the instrument, methodology of the study, and interpretations of the findings. Committee members were provided access to raw data, field notes, and the taxonomy chart through NVivo 11.

Reflexivity Statement

The primary researcher in this study was born and raised in the South, as well as in the Southern Baptist Church. She still identifies as highly committed in Christianity and believes that the Bible guides her decisions and thinking. The researcher 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

in Mississippi and was raised there. Now, living in Arkansas, the researcher can clearly be identified as a “southerner”, as she has never permanently lived anywhere other than the Southern region of the United States. Through this experience, the primary researcher gained insights on how people in the South purchase, prepare, and consume foods. As a result, the primary researcher and the committee for this project recognized that there was inherently some bias. However, the primary researcher made intentional attempts to only speak through previous research and welcomed challenging opinions and comments from faculty during the entirety of the project. Furthermore, various rigor efforts were put in place to ensure that any bias found by means of statistics, other researchers, or participants of the study was removed.

Summary

This study was qualitative in nature and employed the use of a semi-structured interview following the practices of Merriam (2009) using both open-ended questions. Following the constant comparative method as defined by Wimmer and Dominick (2003), a codebook was developed to analyze doctrine and field notes. The analysis of all these documents lead to the results and conclusions of this study.

Chapter Four: Results and Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study in the form of themes that emerged during the course of data analysis. The goal of this study was to develop a clear picture of how obesity in the South is still so prevalent even though the majority of inhabitants subscribe to a faith that discourages unhealthy lifestyles. Furthermore, this research sought to fill the knowledge gap for communicators and educators concerning the dissonance between Christianity in the South and the unhealthy eating habits of Southerners, and therefore provide a better audience analysis for various uses. To address these goals, the results are presented in the order of the following research questions:

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. What is the level of awareness among Christians in the South of the dissonance between their eating habits and their knowledge of nutrition and health topics in Biblical teachings?
5. If Christians in the South are aware of the dissonance, how do they feel about it and how do they reconcile it in their personal lives?

Data Analysis

These results are based upon a study conducted among 11 participants, all of whom were lifetime- residents of the Southern region of the United States and identified themselves as a

member of a denomination of evangelical Protestant Christianity. The findings were obtained through a thematic analysis of interview transcripts.

One overarching theme was that while all participants stated that they believe the Bible is inerrant, as well as referenced scriptures associated with food and health, none of these participants mentioned eating decisions based on the Bible.

Demographics

The interview transcripts of this study represented diverse perspectives as a result of the subjects' ages, religious denominations, genders, and geographical locations. This section details the demographics which were self-reported by the participants during their interviews. Out of the sample of 11 participants, all self-identified as being raised in the South, both geographically and culturally. Table 1 represents all demographics of the participants which were needed to provide context for this study. All names of participants have been changed for anonymity.

Table 1. Demographics of the Study

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

Perceptions of Christians in the South on Food and its Purpose

This section describes the perceptions of Christians in the South as they pertain to the purposes of food, both for an individual and for a society. These thematic purposes described by the subjects included bringing people together, sustenance or survival, enjoyment, comfort, and entertainment. Participants were asked a series of open-ended interview questions outlined in Appendix C (see page 96).

Sustenance/ Survival

All participants of this study stated that a purpose of food is to sustain life. In each interview, participants shared 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.”

When asked about the purpose of food, another participant, Danielle Henderson, emphasized that food is meant for survival.

“It is to sustain my life, my body. To keep me alive.”

Heather Elliot also went as far as to explain that the purpose of food is to sustain us, and argued that as the reason that God gave the world food.

“[It's] 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 the sample of 11 Christians in the South, 8 participants 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 expressed that food gives 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."

Another participant, Trina Bates, added that food serves social and familial 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."

Enjoyment

More than half of the participants in this study referred to enjoyment when describing the purposes of food. Chris Martin recognized that food was for fuel, but expanded that to explain that good food is something to enjoy.

"[The purpose of food is] to fuel my body, but also to be something to be enjoyed, you know? Good food is a good part of life. The fact that you get to enjoy food is pretty great."

Some participants expressed a level of guilt when describing enjoyment as a purpose of food. For example, Charles Rutledge first referenced food as fuel, but then followed that by describing good food as a guilty pleasure that he enjoys too much.

"The purpose of food—I try to have food in my mind as fuel. That's my ultimate goal is to have it in my mind as fuel for my body. But at the end of the day, there's also that guilty pleasure that really likes sweets. I'm a huge sweets fan... So that's when food becomes more of a desire or a temptation, but I try to keep it in the back of my mind that food is fuel."

Perceptions of Christians in the South on Health and Nutrition

This section reveals the described perceptions provided by Christians in the South regarding health and nutrition. This section addresses the level of knowledge that participants described themselves as having and ways that this level of knowledge affects their eating habits, as well as the sources of their nutritional knowledge.

Levels of Knowledge Regarding Nutrition and Health

Average Level of Knowledge of Nutrition and Health

The majority of participants were identified as having an average level of knowledge regarding health and nutrition. Participants who were labeled as “average” often mentioned having some knowledge, but not enough to consider themselves highly knowledgeable. Most often, participants said something along the lines of knowing enough to manage, but not enough to pass a quiz on the subject. For example, Wilson Camp self-identified as having an average amount of knowledge by explaining that he has 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.”

High Level of Knowledge of Nutrition and Health

Three participants were identified as having a high level of health and nutrition, and all had significant nutrition education provided by experts, like health care providers and physical trainers. However, each participant who displayed a high level of nutrition knowledge also revealed that they often don't follow the recommended practices that they have learned.

For example, Trina Baker explained that she has learned from a licensed dietitian, yet still makes unhealthy decisions.

“Well, I have actually taken lessons with a dietitian... so I have to be monitored, and so they recommended classes with the dietitian and I've taken some of those. Also, I know the portion sizes and I know the information for monitoring my glucose and things like that, and I try to follow them, but you know, sometimes you just gotta eat that cheeseburger.”

Danielle Henderson has lived with Type One diabetes for 33 years, which she explained has heavily impacted her knowledge of nutrition. However, she concluded her answer by saying that her knowledge differs from her actions.

“Now, I did attend some classes through the hospital to teach me how to eat as a diabetic at Forest General Hospital... I’ve studied it over the years, I know what to eat, and I know how to eat better and cook better, I just don’t.”

Low Level of Knowledge of Nutrition and Health

Only two participants identified themselves as having a low level of nutritional knowledge. Participant Justin Small said that he has little knowledge about what he should be eating or how food affects his body.

“I can tell you that I don’t know a whole lot as far as nutrition goes, what’s best for me or anything like that.”

Similarly, Heather Elliot said that, aside from knowing what foods make her feel good, she did not know much about health and nutrition.

“I would say I’m probably not very well-versed in the health side of food. I used to run, so I know having that like protein for my body is really necessary, so I would know whenever I’m doing more running or more hardcore stuff, and I would have more protein than I would on a normal week. So, not a whole lot but enough to get by.”

Sources of Nutrition and Health Knowledge

During the interviews, participants identified the sources of their information regarding health and nutrition, which is reported below. 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 interview referenced school-based nutritional education. However, that participant, Harley Crosby, also mentioned that her nutrition education from school was not memorable.

“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.”

Experts

Five participants attributed their knowledge of nutrition to experts like healthcare providers and physical trainers. Wilson Camp mentioned that a close friend of his is a physical trainer, and that personal connection had provided him with much of his nutritional knowledge.

“I have a buddy of mine who's a physical trainer and he's done a lot of research in nutrition specialties and all that stuff. So whenever I decided to start eating healthy again, I called him up and he made a plan for me. He told me where all of the numbers come from, how he got there, how he found that out, so whenever I have a question about healthy eating, I would go to him and he's pretty knowledgeable about it.”

Another participant, Chris Martin, credited healthcare providers with his knowledge on nutrition and health.

“So, my mom is a nurse. And so, like, I mean I think she instilled in me a pretty solid knowledge of food and nutrition.”

These Christians in the South illustrated that many consumers are taking advantage of professional help in understanding food as it pertains to personal health and nutrition. However, it should also be noted that each participant who gathered information from an expert did so through a personal connection, such as a friend or family member. There were no cases of participants who had reached out to a healthcare provider or physical trainer that they did not already know on a personal level.

Online

Many participants said that their primary source of information regarding health and nutrition came as a result of seeking information online. Danielle Henderson described an extensive amount of personal research focused on food and how it affects the human body.

“I researched a lot to find out exactly what I need to be eating.”

However, participant Lucas Strong recognized a lack of trustworthiness in his online sources.

“It's mainly from online and stuff like that, but I know some of that stuff is lies and, like, fad diets and stuff.”

In the case of these participants, online resources provided much of the knowledge that they claimed to have regarding health and nutrition.

Family

Another recurring theme among participants was the gathering of knowledge through family members. Parents and spouses were identified as key informants for participants in nutrition and health. Participant Deborah Beasley credited much of her knowledge to her parents, mentioning that a balanced diet was always part of her childhood.

“I grew up with it, and that's just something we've always had. Balanced meals at dinner, and my mom always packed our lunches for school, so we always had balanced meals for lunches, too.”

Justin Small even said that he does not have much knowledge on the subject, but rather he just trusts that his wife does.

“As far as me saying that what we eat here at home is healthy, it's just because my wife reads all the nutrition books and the diet books and all that stuff, so she tells me what is good for me.”

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

This section outlines the importance of the Bible as a guide for living described by the participants of this study. It also presents themes that emerged when discussing the Bible as it relates to food, health, and nutrition. Despite the diversity of demographics among in the individuals interviewed, 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 study had a task of identifying what Christians in the South believe about their religion as it relates to eating. Thus, the interviews shed light on a number of topics that participants believe are referenced in the Bible.

Bible Is Inerrant

Every participant in this study said they believe that everything in the Bible is true and that the document is inerrant. This information was significant for the purposes of this study in that the participants often mentioned that they view the Bible as a high authority and set of directions for their lives. In fact, 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.

Jonathan Truman explained that his faith affects everything about his daily life, including spiritual disciplines like reading the Bible and having conversations about it.

“It's a part of my daily rhythm, so whether it's prayer or reading the word, meditating on God's word, spiritual conversations that I try to have, whether it's at a coffee shop, evangelistic encounters, or just weekly small group gatherings.”

Danielle Henderson emphasized that all her decisions in life are based on the Bible. She explained that she seeks to understand God's word and to read every day, as she believes that's something she's supposed to do.

“I'm trying to live for God and so, all my decisions, you know, everything that I do, I look to what God's word tells me to do. Now 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. And to study it as He tells us, so, you know, everything I do is for Him.”

Descriptions of a God-Honoring Lifestyle

Eleven Christians in the South were prompted to describe characteristics of a God-honoring lifestyle. Each participant of this study provided a variety of ideas associated with a God-honoring lifestyle including reading the Bible, praying, evangelizing, and putting God first. 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. All 11 participants clearly explained their

visions of a God-honoring lifestyle, but each answer was unique, and none contained references to food, health, or nutrition-related concepts at all.

Biblical References of Food and Health

The participants were asked to discuss Biblical references they believe relate to food or healthy living. While each participant had a unique perspective on this question, two major themes emerged: the body being a temple of God which is meant to be cared for, and gluttony or overeating.

The Body is a Temple

All participants were asked to explain what they believe the Bible says about food and health. 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 the Bible says that you need to treat your body like a temple and you need to make sure that you fuel your body in the way you should, not the way you shouldn't.”

Harley Crosby referenced a similar phrase and explained the importance of caring for the body well.

“There are places in the Bible, different verses that say that your body's a temple and the Lord wants you to take care of it.”

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 believe 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 pretty clear that gluttony is bad. Anything in excess is bad."

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."

While there were a number of other answers, including fasting and the Last Supper, only gluttony and the idea of the body as a temple were repeated by multiple participants. As a result, participants were later asked to define gluttony based on their knowledge of what the term meant.

Defining Gluttony

All participants of the study were given the opportunity to define gluttony in their own words. 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, like excessive eating. Just eating too much to the point that you’re over-full.”

Another participant, Heather Elliot, described gluttony similarly, noting that it is the act of eating too much. However, she also pointed out the problem of finding joy in indulging in foods.

“[Gluttony is when] you know you've eaten enough to sustain you, and you're just eating to eat and you're getting happiness from that. When the food becomes your God and the source of your joy, and God is no longer your God, that's when I think gluttony is something that's gets very real.”

Several participants noted that gluttony involves eating to the point that bodily damage or pain is caused. For example, Justin Small said that gluttony ends up hurting the gluttonous person.

“When you eat until you’re full and then you keep eating and you end up hurting yourself. That's gluttony.”

Similarly, Harley Crosby explained that gluttony could be defined by eating so much that it causes sickness.

“Eating until you’re sick. Sick. Completely sick... You know, you eat too much, you gain too much weight, you get sick, and then it causes all those problems, like diabetes.”

Danielle Henderson also mentioned long-term 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.”

Regardless of the variety of participants, gluttony developed a definition from Christians in the South which referenced overeating or overindulging in foods.

Level of Awareness Among Christians in the South of the Dissonance Between Eating Habits, Knowledge of Nutrition, and Health Topics in Biblical Teachings

This section discusses some of the ways in which Christians from the South that participated in this study revealed a cognitive dissonance between their beliefs and their eating habits. The previous section displayed the beliefs of these southern Christians have regarding the Bible and its expectations for their lives and dietary lives. However, this section presents several reasons why Christians choose the foods that they do, which reveals that no participant referenced their scriptural instruction or belief system when making decisions for meals.

Reasons for Food Selection

During the interview for this study, Christians in the South shared about their eating habits and explained the decision-making process involved in choosing the items that make up their meals. There was one main theme that emerged from all participants, as well as a few other themes that were referenced by 2-5 participants.

Taste and Desirability

All participants of this study referred to taste and desirability as a reason for their selection of foods for each meal. One participant, Lucas Strong, said that there was not a significant amount of thinking 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”

Wilson Camp also shared a mindset of seeking taste.

“I mean, obviously I want my food to taste good, and I mean, I want to like it.”

Charles Rutledge said that he was tired of seeking healthy diet options because of their poor taste, and instead prefers food that tastes better.

“For me, I want it to taste good. I've done a bunch of the meal preps before. No, I want something that has some taste, you know, I've done the bad tasting stuff for a very long period of time. I can't do it anymore. I could, but I don't want to, so.”

Health

Another theme emerged in the interviews. Although the references to this theme were significantly less than taste or desirability, health was mentioned in half of the study's interviews. However, with each reference of taste, participants concluded their responses by speaking on the importance of taste sometimes overriding the benefits of healthy choices.

Participants like Chris Martin are a prime example of this.

“Normally, what makes me feel good is the healthier options. It's like, ‘Okay, I know that this isn't going to taste better than other things on the front end, but on the back end of things, this is going to be more rewarding.’ So I think that's why I choose things, but then also, sometimes I just want to eat something tasty.”

Danielle Henderson also explained how health heavily impacts her decisions, but she still often opts for taste.

“One thing that you probably need to know up front is that I'm a type one diabetic and I have been for 33 years. So, I have to keep that in mind when making all my food choices... I cheat a bunch, my husband doesn't cheat, but I do.”

How Christians in the South are Reconciling the Cognitive Dissonance

The majority of the participants of this study admitted to seeing gluttony in their own lifestyles. This revealed a large awareness of the dissonance among Christians in the South and their beliefs. This section provides insight on the responses of participants as they realized their dissonances, as well as ways that those actions and beliefs are being reconciled.

Gluttony in the Southern Christian Lifestyle

During this study, participants were asked if they thought gluttony was a personal experience in their own lives. Most of the participants responded by claiming gluttony in their lives, as well as providing a bit of insight on what that looks like. 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 about 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 it 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 cheese-its that your kids love so much, you really, really, really like Cheez-It's 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-It's. 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 you know just drink 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. So I'm a seven, and seven's are, like, the most gluttonous type. So the answer is yes, absolutely. All forms of excess, whether it be alcohol, drugs, food. I like to think that I like am much more controlled in those things than I have been in the past, but it's all of those that are absolutely a struggle for me. I like, really 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."

Some participants only recognized their gluttony but did not show much guilt. Danielle Henderson gave a shorter response to this question.

"Oh yes. Yeah, I eat too much a lot and I know I do and I need to quit. But I still do it."

Similarly, Lucas Strong did not even discuss the matter, he only verbalized that he recognized it. When asked if he had been gluttonous in his life, he responded:

"Yeah, definitely."

Church Culture with Food

Different Christians from the South 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.”

One participant, Jonathan Truman, explained how food is a big part of events and programming at his local 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.”

Participant Justin Small mentioned that food at the church is a regular occurrence because it is used for gathering and for holiday events, as well as for providing aid to families in need.

“We do have meals at events and we have holiday get-togethers with the church. And anytime there's a family in need, we'll get together at the church and provide food for them, for whatever the need is- funerals, anything like that, so. We do eat together a lot at the Church.”

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

Recognizing that Christians in the South are a diverse population with many factors playing into their decisions, rather than just held solely to scripture is key to developing effective communication and education efforts. Previous research recommended that religion be considered when developing communication efforts in a highly religious community (Viita, 2017). This chapter attempts to summarize the patterns of decision-making made by Christians in the South, as well as explain the reconciliation between their beliefs and their lifestyle choices. The southern Christians who participated in this study have different needs for marketing and communication tactics, as well as for extension education efforts and classroom nutrition education curricula. This confirms the literature by Simplemachine Marketing (2016) which argues that communication efforts need to be catered, and southern culture is a unique phenomenon to be understood before effective and transformative communication of any kind can be accomplished.

This chapter summarizes the findings presented as results in chapter four, illustrating the dissonance in decision-making processes among Christians in the South. This study sought to expand the understanding of the decision-making patterns of this population, as well as the process of reconciliation of their cognitive dissonance. The study involved in-depth, open-ended interviews and qualitative analysis, exploratory in nature, to gain insight on the subjects under study for 11 cases of Christians from the South identified in seven different states and five different Evangelical Protestant Christian denominations.

This research is intended to initiate understanding of how obesity in the South is still so prevalent 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 and educators concerning the dissonance between Christianity in the South and the unhealthy eating habits of Southerners. The findings were organized around the following five research questions where the summary and findings and conclusions are drawn directly from the study itself:

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. What is the level of awareness among Christians in the South of the dissonance between their eating habits and their knowledge of nutrition and health topics in Biblical teachings?
5. If Christians in the South are aware of the dissonance, how do they feel about it and how do they reconcile it in their personal lives?

Perceptions of Christians in the South on Food and its Purpose

This study explored the descriptions provided by Christians in the South to explain their perceptions of the purposes for food. An overwhelming number of these participants revealed that they understand a purpose of food to be survival and sustenance. However, it was also emphasized by multiple participants 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 Rozin (2006), which described the cultural evolution of the purpose of food transforming from fuel into a

vessel for social interaction. 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. Sack (2001) noted all types of food uses in churches, like Sunday School doughnuts and church pot-luck dinners to point to the fact that food, especially high-fat foods, seems to be the key to the functioning of a church's social organization.

Perceptions of Christians in the South on Health and Nutrition

The majority of Christians from the South who were interviewed for this study self-identified as having an average level of knowledge of food, nutrition, and health. Other participants who identified themselves 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. This compares to the literature, specifically from Connell (1985), which explained that knowledge (such as nutritional knowledge) doesn't immediately affect behaviors, and instead has to be continuously taught and solidified. This behavior also shows signs of the theoretical framework guiding this data—the Cognitive Dissonance Theory by Festinger (1957). While most participants claimed to be at least moderately knowledgeable on the aspects of healthy life decisions, they often showed a dissonance between that knowledge and their choices regarding food.

Furthermore, an important connection emerged among these participants regarding their level of nutritional knowledge and their sources in which they gained those insights. Nutritional education efforts employed by primary school curricula, marketing campaigns, or any type of adult education was not credited by any participants as having any kind of effect on their level of

knowledge. Instead, all participants who self-identified as having a high level of knowledge on nutrition and health attained their information through personal connections. Although these participants referenced these sources of information as being healthcare workers or physical trainers, they were all also linked as friends or family members of the participants. This further establishes the idea that more effective efforts are needed in the world of communication, education, and extension in order to reach these audiences.

Other participants who were identified as having an average or high level of nutritional knowledge explained that the main sources for their information were online. Specific credible websites were not discussed, but some participants expressed their distrust in the articles they were reading. However, this demonstrated a clear indicator that online content is desirable for these consumers when they are seeking knowledge regarding food choices and nutritional lifestyles.

Another notable theme among the participants of this study is that none of the participants shared a proactive mindset regarding gaining a high 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. This ranged from noticeable overweightness to a diabetes diagnosis. These Christians in the South did not express any interest in learning this information in order to maintain a healthy lifestyle; instead, their interest in learning about nutrition was related to backtracking as they envisioned undoing the consequences of their unhealthy choices so far in their lives.

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

The Christians from across the South who participated in this study all agreed that the Bible is true and inerrant, which solidified the consistency in beliefs among Evangelical

Protestant Christians defined by Bebbington (1989), the most commonly used definition in religious academia. 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 knowledge of scripture which is consistent with commentaries presented by well-known pastors like John Piper (2008). Although these participants did not go into as much detail as the literature provided in this study, there was still an overall attitude toward food in which Christians understood that harming the body through an overindulgence in food was sinful, and, therefore, against their religious beliefs.

While all participants had unique descriptions of gluttony, all agreed fundamentally that gluttony involved overindulging in food. Many participants noted that gluttony involved loving food too much or finding too much joy in it, while others explained that gluttony was causing harm to your body by eating beyond basic nutritional needs or beyond satiety.

Few participants mentioned communion, celebratory feasts, and sustaining of life through food as it pertained to Biblical references. This contrasted from other literature from Piper (2014) and Harp (2018), who wrote Christian commentaries that gave many accounts for the goodness and blessings that come from food.

Furthermore, an interesting finding of this study was discovered upon analysis of the responses when participants were 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. This further displays the dissonance and disconnect between their clear descriptions of Biblical references and their lifestyle choices. However, with discussions of sexual purity and abstaining from a “partying” lifestyle, participants confirmed the research literature by Sack (2001) and Cline & 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.”

Level of Awareness Among Christians in the South of the Dissonance Between Eating Habits, Knowledge of Nutrition, and Health Topics in Biblical Teachings

This research was intended to initiate the development of a clear picture of how obesity in the South is still so prevalent even though the majority of inhabitants subscribe to a faith that discourages unhealthy lifestyles. Although many documented national efforts to educate U.S. consumers about nutrition have been undertaken, this study indicates the need for a new approach focusing on the decision-making of religious consumers in the South. Furthermore, the findings presented should fill the knowledge gap for communicators and educators concerning the dissonance between Christianity in the South and the unhealthy eating habits of Southerners. These findings bring a deeper understanding to the preferences of consumers, as well as a demonstration of consumers ignoring the knowledge, both of nutrition and Biblical references of food and health.

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. Lucas Strong and Heather Elliot were prime examples of how some subjects overtly displayed the presence of dissonance in their lives regarding food choices and religious beliefs.

Furthermore, the other main theme that emerged from the interviews was that health was a decision-making factor for food selections. Interestingly, all participants who referenced health also ended their response by declaring a bit of cognitive dissonance. These participants explained that health is a factor, but they often just choose foods based on cravings or desires, rather than the healthiness. In these responses, the participants recognized their own cognitive dissonance to a degree. However, these participants used humor as a way of approaching the short discussion of their dissonance, which reveals that they are not at a level of awareness which creates discomfort and demands reconciliation (Festinger, 1957).

How Christians in the South are Reconciling the Cognitive Dissonance

This study was meant for the purposes of understanding the decision-making behind the overeating habits in the South despite the region being highly committed to a religion which condemns gluttony. Communicators and educators alike can use the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger, 1957) to understand how Christians in the South are reconciling a lack of harmony between their religious beliefs and their actions (eating habits). The findings of this

study concluded that, while the majority of the Christians in the South who participated in this study fully recognized the presence of their dissonance, many of them committed to their eating habits and trivialized the issue of overeating.

In the interviews conducted for this study, most participants admitted to committing gluttony, often habitually. This revealed that the Southern Christians in this study were aware of the dissonance. In many instances, like Justin Small, the participants actually included their own definition of gluttony in their explanation of personal experiences with gluttony. He described overindulgence to the point of developing an allergy to seafood, and then continuing beyond that while taking allergy medications. However, earlier in his interview, Justin Small defined gluttony as overindulging to the point that one harms his or her body. With several other instances similar to this, a conclusion of the study was that these Christians in the South know the consequences of their actions, but still make unhealthy decisions because they desire good food. Furthermore, many participants, like Trina Bates and Heather Elliot, credited southern culture with much of this type of decision making. The South was called a “breeding ground for gluttony” as participants explained that food, specifically good food (also called “soul food” by a participant), is a need and a want in social gatherings, familial events, and church programming.

In fact, the church culture regarding food precipitated a large amount of discussion among participants in this study. Almost all of the responses on this topic explained that fellowship is a foundational aspect of a healthy church and food serves the purpose of bringing people together, therefore developing an avenue for fellowship. Interestingly, many participants included the fact that at the majority of these gatherings around food, there was not much effort to include healthy options. In most cases, participants described a typical Southern homestyle meal, primarily consisting of carbs and fried meats. Furthermore, these gatherings were also

described as having an abundance of foods, to the point that all in attendance have enough to take leftovers home. In each case when a southern Christian from this study explained these events at the church, they proudly spoke of these events, displaying a bit of reconciliation in their dissonance by justifying that the focus is not on their food choices, but rather their choice to gather with others and create fellowship. In fact, Chris Martin even mentioned how the pastor of his church often tells stories of Jesus Christ in which Jesus shared meals with others. He explained that a big part of Jesus' ministry revolved around meals and how that was a clear demonstration of how the church should follow. This is yet another example of Christians in the South finding consonance between their beliefs and actions according to Festinger's (1957) theory of Cognitive Dissonance. In the cases of this study, many participants achieved a reconciliation by trivializing (Wiafe, 2012). In other words, these southern Christians found parts of the Bible which they believe justify their eating habits, causing them to downplay the ideas of gluttony in their minds. As marketers and educators further recognize the importance of understanding the decision-making and thinking behind consumers (Mialki, 2020; Marshall, 2020; Galloway, 2017), this study presents insight into how Christians in the South are achieving consonance regarding this lack of harmony, which is key to developing effective marketing campaigns as well as educational curricula for these religious southerners that make up a large majority of the Southern United States.

Recommendations for Communication Campaigns and Marketing Practices

It is recommended that communication campaigns and marketing practices invest in producing content which boasts in the flavor and desirability of the foods that they represent. Furthermore, professionals in this industry should orient food product marketing as more family-

based or fellowship-based in order to appeal to the perspectives that southern Christians have on food.

In the world of agricultural communications, numerous reports and analyses have verified that effective communication is vital in every sector of agriculture-related activity (Zumalt, 2008). With the general food marketing still revolving mainly around demographic characteristics (Perner, n.d.), much literature argues that there is a high demand for more targeted marketing tactics (Marshall, 2020; Galloway, 2017; Quick, 2017). However, Quick (2017) also argues that assumptions 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 marketing healthy and nutritional food options is best to accommodate the Biblically-motivated consumers (Rainbolt et al., 2012). However, this study reveals that the consumers of the South who participated in this project did not make selections based on health, nutrition, or faith. These participants, though claiming high commitment to Christianity, 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.

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.

Therefore, the recommendation that communication campaigns and marketing practices should invest in producing content which boasts in the flavor and desirability of the foods that they represent is supported by previous literature, as well as the findings of this study. In addition to this, the findings of this study support the emphasis on a high demand for more targeted marketing tactics (Marshall, 2020; Galloway, 2017; Quick, 2017) as well as the value of faith-based marketing (Kuhn, 2011). This implicates a recommendation to communicators and marketers to consider that Christians in the South may view food differently than non-Christians, as they revealed in this study that they directly associate eating and unhealthy foods with bringing people together.

Recommendations for Grade School Educators

It is highly recommended that educators take a proactive approach in teaching nutrition education in an effort to increase nutrition education and reduce obesity. It is also recommended that educators consider the religious experiences of the majority of children in the Bible Belt. Educators should be passionate about transforming the reasoning behind food choice from taste and desirability to health and nutritional value as a method of reducing obesity in the South.

This study reinforced the concepts presented in previous research regarding the current ineffective educational methods intended to reach children in the classroom. The CDC (2015) said that students in the U.S. only receive eight hours or less of nutrition education, even though studies show that 40 to 50 hours are needed to affect behaviors (Connell, 1985). Furthermore, The Food and Nutrition Board (2014) noted that schools are only implementing nutrition education when it is convenient for their curricula, as it is not a tested subject. This study revealed that the Christians from the South who participated in this study did not give credit to any sort of effectiveness regarding primary school efforts for training children in nutrition

education. In fact, when asked about the sources where they gathered their nutritional and health knowledge, no participant mentioned any type of educational efforts. Although it is the decision of teachers and their local administration, it is seemingly-necessary that educators take a proactive approach in teaching nutrition education. The USDA (2013) provided clear evidence that well-designed and well-executed nutrition education programs can reduce obesity by developing healthier and more informed choices and lifestyles in students.

If educators aim to create and implement productive and engaging curriculum, it is crucial that they understand and integrate the cultural background of their students into more effective educational strategies (Stronge, 2018; Roberts et al., 2016). Therefore, it is recommended that educators consider the religious experiences of the majority of children in the Bible Belt. The participants of this study revealed that food choices are typically based on taste and desire. So, effectively executing health and nutrition education is key to catalyzing a change in eating habits among students in the South (Connell, 1985; Food and Nutrition Board, 2014). Therefore, educators should be passionate about transforming the reasoning behind food choice from taste and desirability to health and nutritional value as a method of reducing obesity in the South.

Recommendations for Extension Educators

With more than 30 percent of adults in the South are obese, according to the CDC (2020), it is recommended that extension educators develop curricula which considers the religion of the majority of the South (evangelical Protestant Christianity) and the cognitive dissonance present among some of those Christians when it comes to their eating habits. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to present adult consumers with curriculum which incorporates the taste and desirability of healthy and nutritious foods, as this was the major deciding factor in what foods

the participants of this study selected. Finally, it is also recommended that extension educators consider the religious experiences of the majority of adults in the Bible Belt, as well as their religion-based perceptions, when developing and implementing adult education programs.

This study confirmed previous literature that argued the need for effective nutritional curriculum in extension programs. Education and nutrition knowledge are directly associated with knowing and understanding nutrition labels (Dumoitier et al., 2019). Therefore, this study affirms the notion that adult nutrition education must be established before other methods are effective. The participants of this project revealed a need for an increase in nutrition education as the majority of those interviewed self-reported as having an average or low level of knowledge about health and nutrition. In a study by Ellison (2013), levels of education and nutrition knowledge proved to heavily impact a consumer's ability to comprehend and compare food and menu labels. Similarly, the majority of this study's participants did not display high levels of nutrition knowledge and all participants said that a primary focus of their food purchasing and consuming was based on taste and desirability. As the 1990 Nutrition Labeling and Education Act highlighted that nutrition education is a necessity in fighting obesity and diet-related health issues, it is recommended that extension educators develop and implement stronger curriculum regarding health and nutrition, which is supported by a study conducted by the Food and Nutrition service of the USDA that reported well-designed nutrition education programs leading to healthier eating choices (USDA, 2013).

When developing curriculum for adult and extension education, educators should seek a deeper understanding of their audience's background and integrate that into their strategies (Roberts et al., 2016). Furthermore, according to the AAAE, when pursuing a goal of meaningful and engaged learning environments, it should be a priority to examine the role of diversity and

multiple perspectives across different contexts (Roberts et al., 2016). In the case of the “Bible Belt,” understanding simple demographics is not enough to produce effective communication, as this study revealed a theme of disregard of religious beliefs and teachings when the participants discussed their decision-making for food purchasing and consumption. With more than 30 percent of adults in the South are obese, according to the CDC (2020), it is recommended that extension educators develop curriculum which considers the religion of the majority of the South (evangelical Protestant Christianity) and the cognitive dissonance present among some of those Christians when it comes to their eating habits. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to present adult consumers with curriculum which incorporates the taste and desirability of healthy and nutritious foods, as this was the major deciding factor in what foods the participants of this study selected. This recommendation is based on the findings of this study as well as a study done by the USDA in 2013 with the SNAP program. In the USDA SNAP study, adults who completed the SNAP curriculum adopted healthier behaviors and participated in more open discussions regarding the challenges of purchasing, preparing, and consuming healthy food items while on a budget.

Another notable factor provided by the participants of this study is that there is a unique perception of their religious experiences regarding food choices and consumptions. Many participants implied 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 noted that fellowship was necessary to the Christian lifestyle. In fact, 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. So, considering this outlook on food and community could be helpful in the realm of adult and extension education.

Recommendations for Church Curricula and Leadership

It is recommended that churches develop more curriculum regarding health, nutrition, and care of the body as it pertains to a spiritual, Christian life. Additionally, it is encouraged that churches incorporate food and nutrition into curriculum regarding lifestyle choices, rather than avoiding or dismissing conversations about gluttony and similar habits involving food.

The majority of religious people in the South identify as evangelical Protestant Christians (Harvey, 2015). This group of Christians is well-known for their stance on the Bible as being absolute in the fact that the Bible is the highest authority (Bebbington, 1989). However, though the participants of this study claimed a high level of religiosity and associated with a denomination within the realm of evangelical Protestantism, there were no participants who referenced the Bible or their religion when describing their food choices and eating habits. These participants did, however, recognize the presence of health-related scripture in the Bible. References made by the Christians from the South in this study mirrored commentaries by Piper (2008; 2014), Harp (2018), and Bowers (2015). Many of the participants of this study primarily referenced the body as a “temple of God” which should be cared for, and they also mentioned gluttony as a sin. However, some participants of the study explained that gluttony is often ignored and not discussed in their church. In fact, many credited their churches as being a major source of unhealthy eating due to the fellowship and outreach events always incorporating “soul foods” into programming. Some participants directly correlated gathering together, fellowship, family and community with food, declaring that food was a staple of bringing people together and creating intimacy. These claims supported literature by Sack (2001), which argued that many

Christians dismiss the unhealthy relationships with food because it serves as a key factor in the functioning of a church's social organization. In fact, it was mentioned by participants of this study that gluttony is often avoided in conversations or justified in religious groups or church functions. Furthermore, the responses of some participants affirmed the study conducted by Cline and Ferraro (2006) that presented the notion that as long as Christians abstain from other "more sinful" habits, excessive dietary consumption was dismissed as a problem.

With studies showing that religious groups have higher rates of overweightness and obesity (Cline and Ferraro, 2006), specifically conservative Protestant denominations (Kim, Sobal, and Wethington, 2003), it is recommended that churches develop more curriculum regarding health, nutrition, and care of the body as it pertains to a spiritual life. Many participants admitted that they did not know much about what the Bible says regarding food and health, which provides insight as to where churches can further develop curriculum for the members of their congregations. Furthermore, encouraging a spiritual mindset on matters of eating habits is recommended. Previous literature revealed that religions like Mormonism and Seventh Day Adventists stress health protective behaviors, and, therefore, have lower rates of obesity (Kim, Sobal, and Wethington, 2003). This study displays that the evangelical Protestant participants did not relate food choices and eating habits with the concept of a God-honoring lifestyle, even after discussing the topic multiple times previously in their interview. It is encouraged that churches incorporate food and nutrition into curriculum regarding lifestyle choices, which commentaries from Piper (2008; 2014), Harp (2018), and Bowers (2015) all affirm are scripturally-accurate recommendations.

Further, it is the recommendation of the researcher that churches encourages Biblical literacy. In this study, participants were asked to provide Biblical contexts of food and health;

however, no participant referenced the Garden of Eden, God providing manna to His people while they were in the wilderness, the Last Supper, the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand, etc. The religious academic involved with this study was often surprised at the lack of these significant stories being referenced, and some participants actually had no answer at all. In the cases of these participants, an increase in Biblical literacy is recommended, both for understanding of their faith and for understanding God's perspective of food.

Finally, church leadership should encourage more in-depth conversations regarding food and self-control. In the commentaries by Piper (2008; 2014), Harp (2018), and Bowers (2015), the answer often comes back to self-control as the answer to resolving the issue of overeating in the church. As demonstrated by some of the participants of this study, Christians in the South often understand what gluttony is, yet still make gluttonous decisions based on how much they desire tasty foods. As much of the Christian Bible explains, knowing scripture is not enough—doing what scripture says is necessary.

Recommendations for Further Research

In the future, researchers should further the research of this population in order to develop more generalizable results and gain a deeper understanding into levels of desirability and flavor that is preferred by the consumers of the Bible Belt, as well as the concept of food as an avenue for gathering and fellowship. It would also be beneficial to research the effectiveness of taste-based marketing and education, as well as fellowship-oriented tactics on this population. Additionally, researchers should also consider similar religion-based studies in other regions of the U.S. and the world. Some research already exists considering the marketing tactics related to faith-based marketing to Jewish consumers, and it is encouraged to expand upon that research to understand the needs regarding education efforts. Furthermore, investing in similar studies with

focus on other major religions are also important in a world which increasingly demands more specific and intentional messaging.

Finally, there may be benefits to further research regarding the visual aspect of marketing food based on taste and desirability.

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Appendices

Appendix A



To: Karli Stringer
From: Justin R Chimka, Chair
IRB Expedited Review
Date: 09/02/2021
Action: **Expedited Approval**
Action Date: 09/02/2021
Protocol #: 2104330280
Study Title: Dissonance Between Christian Beliefs and Eating Habits in the South
Expiration Date: 07/15/2022
Last Approval Date:

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Jefferson D Miller, Investigator

Appendix B

INFORMED CONSENT

Dissonance Between Christian Beliefs and Eating Habits in the South Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Principal Researcher: Karli Stringer

Faculty Advisory: Dr. Jefferson Miller

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

You are invited to participate in a research study about food and culture. You are being asked to participate in this study because you were recommended to the researcher by someone you know.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Who is the Principal Researcher?

Karli Stringer, a Master's Student at the University of Arkansas

Phone Number: 601-520-1207

Who is the Faculty Advisor?

Dr. Jefferson Miller, a Professor of Agricultural Communications at the University of Arkansas

Phone Number: [REDACTED]

What is the purpose of this research study?

The purpose of this study is to gain understanding on consumer habits and decision making when it comes to food purchasing and consumption.

Who will participate in this study?

The participants of this study are expected to identify as protestant Christians in various stages of adulthood. There are an expected 10-20 participants for this study.

What am I being asked to do?

Your participation will require participation in an interview via Zoom, as well as a review of the information after the interview to ensure accuracy.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?

There are no anticipated risks associated with this study; however, there may be some discomfort in your answers regarding your religious life choices, your eating habits, and/or your general lifestyle.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

There are no anticipated benefits for the participants of this study.

How long will the study last?

Your participation will only be necessary for one interview that is estimated to take 30-45 minutes. This can be set up at your convenience.

Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?

No, there is no anticipated compensation for this study.

Will I have to pay for anything?

No, there will be no cost associated with your participation.

What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?

If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate. Also, you may refuse to participate at any time during the study. You will not be affected in any way if you refuse to participate.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law.

Your name will be changed in the reports of the study, as well as any information shared that could reveal your identity or anybody you spoke about. All data will be anonymous. Records and recordings will be kept in a secure area and will never be released to the public.

Will I know the results of the study?

At the conclusion of the study you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Jefferson Miller, or Principal Researcher, Karli Stringer. You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

What do I do if I have questions about the research study?

You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Advisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Karli Stringer

Phone Number: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Dr. Jefferson Miller

Phone Number: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Integrity and Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP
Institutional Review Board Coordinator
Research Integrity and Compliance
University of Arkansas
109 MLKG Building
Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201



I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

Signature

Appendix C

INSTRUMENTATION

Semi-Structured Questions for Interview

1. How old are you?
2. Describe your relationship with your spiritual beliefs.
 - a. Denomination
 - b. How seriously do you take it or how committed are you or how involved?
 - c. How does this affect your everyday life?
3. Where do you live now?
4. What does your dietary life look like?
 - a. Types of food
 - b. Portions
 - c. frequency of meals, etc.
5. What does your church culture look like regarding food?
6. What do you think is the purpose of food for you?
7. What do you think is the purpose of food for a society?
8. Tell me about your level of knowledge of health and nutrition.
 - a. What did you learn?
 - b. What do you believe?
 - c. Where did you get your information?
9. Do you find exercise to be important in your life? Why or why not?
10. Do you believe that everything in the Bible is true?
11. What does the Bible say, if anything, about food? About health?

12. Does your church take part in Communion? If so, describe what that is like and what it means.
13. How do you choose the items that make up your meal?
14. What do you think is a God-honoring lifestyle?
15. How would you define gluttony?
16. After defining gluttony yourself and answering a few questions about your lifestyle- do you see that as an experience in your own life?
17. Did you grow up in the South?