

## “You Don’t Have to do Anything to Deserve Food:” College Student’s Memorable Messages About Food and Self-Esteem

Carly Densmore  
Jennifer Woolley Barone

*This study investigated the memorable messages about food that college students recall receiving from their parent or guardian and the relationship of these messages on self-esteem from a parent or guardian. Memorable messages about food focused on food as fuel, portion control, food as pleasure, food as economic/privilege, you are what you eat, and body image. Mothers were identified as being the source of the memorable message about food. Although the findings revealed no significant relationship between memorable food messages and self-esteem, and no significant difference between gender identity and self-esteem, the findings provide an initial understanding of the memorable messages given in parent-child communication surrounding food.*

*Keywords:* Memorable messages, self-esteem, parent-child, and food neutrality

### Introduction

Research has established the productive intersections between family and health communication research, as family members serve as agents in an individual’s primary socialization, impacting the development of health behaviors and beliefs (Baiocchi-Wagner, 2015). Since parents serve as the first gatekeeper, model, and educator for nutrition in an individual’s life (Yee et al., 2021), family members’ communication impacts an individual’s perception of their body image and eating behaviors. For example, family teasing about weight and parental dieting can contribute to the development of disordered eating habits or identity stigma for LGBTQ+ populations (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010; Jordan, 2023). In fact, family members, mothers particularly, are often the source of influential messages around weight, compared to peers, medical professionals, or media-sources (Russel & Smith, 2017). With the rise of obesity, a stigmatized and dangerous health condition (Nelson et al., 2008), one’s food choices, in addition their weight, can become a source of scrutiny. When parents discuss food and nutrition with children, obesity faces a distinct caricature: both as a moral danger, and as something within a person’s full control, an idea that casts overweight individuals as irresponsible or lazy (Dorrance Hall et al., 2016; Thompson & Zaitchik, 2012). Thus, how family members communicate about nutrition, weight, and dietary behavior can impact one’s perception of the self and their behavior, potentially in moralistic frames. However, since food should be a neutral topic, an examination into influential messaging on food opens opportunities for understanding healthy family communication.

Memorable messages about food provide uncharted areas in memorable message research, particularly surrounding the role of family communication in well-being and self-esteem, familial commonality, and in future nutritional decision-making. To date, memorable message research has largely focused on messages around weight, an emotionally laden and socially stigmatizing topic (Dorrance Hall et al., 2016; Rubinsky et al., 2019; Russell & Smith, 2017; Thompson & Zaitchik, 2012). For example, young women receive messages about their weight and size, which can impact relationships with food, propensities to eating disorders, body-image satisfaction, as well as self-esteem (Rubinsky et al., 2019). In addition, memorable messages have been revered as a positive contributor to decision-making which might not always be the case in sensitive topics, such as diet and food (Rubinsky et al., 2019; Dorrance Hall et al., 2016). Emerging adulthood is a popular time to study memorable messages, as this period creates opportunities for autonomous decision-making when individuals leave home. Food

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**Carly Densmore** (Ph.D., Ohio University, 2024) will be an Assistant Professor at the University of Idaho in August 2024. Address correspondence to the author at [carlyrdensmore22@gmail.com](mailto:carlyrdensmore22@gmail.com).

**Jennifer Woolley Barone** (Ph.D., Ohio University, 2024) will be a Visiting Assistant Teaching Professor at Villanova University in August 2024.

consumption and nutrition are major areas of decision-making for young adults, and weight-gain, often referred to as the ‘freshman fifteen,’ is common during this time (Thompson & Zaitchik, 2012).

However, unlike weight, food is an otherwise neutral topic that can become vilified and labeled with lasting impacts on individual choices and self-perceptions. Therefore, attunement to the ways parents talk about food with their children is needed to begin identifying what memorable messages surrounding food are recalled by individuals, as well as the effects of these memorable messages on self-esteem. The present research aims to inquire into this gap, identifying the prominent memorable messages college students received about food and their self-esteem.

## Literature Review

### Food Neutrality

Food neutrality describes the growing resistance against the labeling of food in moralistic terms (Tribole & Resch, 2020; Remmer, 2023). Food is not inherently ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ because when these labels are attributed to certain foods, individuals become ‘good’ or ‘bad’ according to what they consume (Tribole & Resch, 2020). Nutritionists and researchers alike advocate for an understanding of food as neutral, much akin to the rise of body neutrality. Remmer (2023) claims that, “labels such as ‘good,’ ‘bad,’ ‘healthy,’ and ‘unhealthy,’ place foods on a hierarchy and attach moral value to them. Using these terms with our kids perpetuates diet culture, disrupts their ability to eat intuitively, and can lead to disordered eating” (para. 4). In fact, BALANCE, an eating disorder treatment center in New York City, articulates food neutrality as a key mental shift for overcoming eating disorders (Rogers, 2018). Overwhelmingly, food neutrality, an unexplored area in communication research, provides an approach to healthy family communication around food, diet, and nutrition. This study follows the rising awareness of food as a neutral entity, exploring memorable messages on food, and their impact on self-esteem, to understand what types of memorable messages on food are sent and by whom.

### Memorable Messages

In their seminal piece on memorable messages, Knapp and colleagues (1982) define memorable messages as “verbal messages which may be remembered for extremely long periods of time and which people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives” (p. 27). Memorable messages persist over time because of their salience to the receiver; typically, memorable messages are brief guidelines or rules given by a person in a position of elder or authority (Knapp et al., 1981). In recall, individuals report confidence in the ability to recollect the message verbatim, and recollection of memorable messages aids in present decisions and sensemaking for individuals (Stohl, 1986). Memorable messages often transcend one particular context, instead allowing wider applicability in an individual’s attitudes and behaviors (Knapp et al., 1981). Despite wider discussion on key characteristics of memorable messages, two necessary conditions classify memorable messages as such: the message is precisely recalled and significant to the receiver (Russell & Smith, 2017). With a broad conceptualization of memorable messages, the conceptual and contextual application is rich in research.

Memorable messages inform daily health behaviors, leading health communication to be a field with ample sources for research. After nearly three decades of research on memorable messages, the ongoing interest in memorable message research within health communication continues (Cooke-Jackson & Rubinsky, 2017; Cooke-Jackson & Rubinsky, 2023). Since memorable messages are brief and often structured as an if/then rule (Knapp et al., 1981), rules about health behaviors fit this structure, leading to memorable messages being influential messages about one’s health behaviors (Cooke-Jackson & Rubinsky, 2019). For example, when parents talk about food, this communication often sets ‘food rules’ that prevent unhealthy consumption and promote healthy behaviors (Yee et al., 2021). However, this guideline is particularly important when examining messages about food, as foods are neutral entities commonly labeled as ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ Parental messages surrounding weight reveal a long-term impact on

diet choice and self-esteem, as individuals can identify messages and cite their parents as the source of their personal struggle with their health (Dorrance Hall et al., 2016). Children initially learn their dietary habits from family socialization (Haines et al., 2019), which offers ample opportunity for parents to provide their children with memorable messages on food.

### ***Message Sender***

Parental figures are influential memorable message senders surrounding food and wellness. Most memorable messages are transmitted face-to-face from an individual older than the receiver (Knapp et al., 1981), allowing the family unit and home to be a prominent site of production. Research still corroborates the interpersonal, hierarchical nature of memorable messages. Russel and Smith (2017) found that the family members serve as the primary source of memorable messages surrounding weight with friends of a higher status position as the second-most common source. In Knapp and colleagues' (1981) original study on memorable messages, over 80% of the receivers were under 21 years of age at the time of message delivery. During adolescence, parents often serve as the primary decision-maker and model surrounding health behaviors (Russel & Smith, 2017). With nutrition, parents act as a model for and gatekeeper on food selection (Yee et al., 2021), and parental dieting is evidenced to impact children's eventual adaption of disordered eating behaviors (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010). Mothers take on the role of caregivers within families. Baiocchi-Wagner and Olson (2016) framed mothers as responsible for *healthcare*, whereas fathers are prominent in *healthplay*. Disproportionately, mothers take on the physical responsibility of wellness. For example, mothers primarily take on the responsibility of driving children to extracurricular sports, grocery shopping and cooking meals, and taking children to healthcare appointments (Baiocchi-Wagner & Olson, 2016). Research on memorable messages surrounding weight, diet, and body-image overwhelmingly focuses on women (Dorrance Hall et al., 2016; Rubinsky et al., 2019). In part, this emphasis on women in diet and weight research can be understood as part of "doing the tradition," a socialization process that places women at the center of caregiving in the family unit (Baiocchi-Wagner & Olson, 2016). In fact, mothers are the most common source of memorable messages (Russel & Smith, 2017), especially during childhood for girls (Rubinsky et al., 2019). The present study seeks to examine the reception of memorable messages regardless of receiver gender, we hypothesize:

**H1:** Female-identifying parents or guardians more frequently send memorable messages surrounding food, compared to male-identifying counterparts.

### ***Message Valence***

An important element of memorable message research is the valence of the message. When the receiver of the memorable message interprets the message, they often interpret it as having a positive, negative, or neutral valence (Smith & Ellis, 2001; Voorhees et al., 2023). The perception of the message plays an important role in memorable message research. Kranstuber et al. (2012) note that, "message characteristics (e.g., valence, perception of parent intent) and relational satisfaction with the message-provider (i.e., the parent) were predictive of student outcomes of college motivation, college satisfaction, learner empowerment, and cognitive learning indicators" (p. 60). Therefore, this suggests that the valence of a message can be predictive of the impact the message has on an individual (Catlett & Koenig Kellas, 2009). Understanding that the memorable message one recalls may be viewed as positive, negative, or neutral, is important when understanding the message as a whole, as well as the message content.

### ***Message Content***

Memorable message research has found that the word-for-word recollection of the message is not as important as the content of the message (Knapp et al., 1981; Holladay, 2002; Cooke-Jackson & Rubinsky, 2018). Memorable messages are typically coded along four lines: the structure of the message, the form and organization of the message, the circumstances surrounding the sending of the message, and the content of the message (Knapp et al., 1981). Often, previous studies focus on the content of the message. When facing a problem, individuals often recollect memorable messages for decision-making

(Thompson & Zaitchik, 2012; Zelaya, 2018; Brown & Wingate, 2022). Memorable messages are often assumed to be beneficial to decision-making, since messages have been studied as solicited by the individual (Knapp et al., 1981). However, recent studies call this finding into question (Rubinsky et al., 2019). Since memorable messages persist, identifying message themes allow for family communication interventions. These interventions tie to the positive or negative long-term impact of such messages on behaviors, as well as the rising awareness of food neutrality compared to the stigmatization of conversations on weight. Due to the limited research surrounding memorable message and food, we offer the following research question:

**RQ1:** What types of memorable messages about food do college students receive from their parents or guardians?

### **Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem is defined as “how much value one places on themselves” (Baumeister et al., 2003, p. 2). This value is based on one’s perception following interactions with others (Baumeister et al., 2003). Self-esteem influences how individuals perceive themselves, which impacts individuality, relationships, and well-being (Baumeister et al., 2003; Branden, 1994). Research on self-esteem and body image or diet behaviors is prominent in adolescents and young adults, a population most vulnerable to eating disorders and body image issues (Sheldon, 2010). Body image and self-esteem can be understood as a relational phenomenon, as co-rumination on body image impact personal beliefs about the self, a popular practice amongst women (Arroyo et al., 2017), and food choices are impacted by other present individuals and their servings (McFerran et al., 2010). Since emerging adults in college constantly witness the food choices of others in dining halls and collective living spaces, body comparison can impact self-esteem. In these environments, individuals likely recall memorable messages on food as a way of navigating nutrition choices.

Exploring memorable messages on food, compared to weight, provides an initial understanding on food neutrality within family communication. Food neutral messages may not be as stigmatizing as conversations on weight, which negatively impact one’s perception of the self and self-esteem (Rubinsky et al., 2019). Family and peer pressure about nutrition and body image impact self-esteem and body satisfaction (Sheldon, 2010). In particular, family and peer pressure are the greatest contributors to body esteem for both men and women (Sheldon, 2010). Although women talk to their friends more, especially negative self-talk on body image (Arroyo et al., 2017), family peer pressure to be thin is strongly correlated with low body esteem for women (Sheldon, 2010). Men experience family pressure, too, as family pressures regarding thinness and food hold greater impact for men than peer pressure (Sheldon, 2010). However, women do experience more pressure for body ideas in general (Arroyo et al., 2017; Sheldon, 2010). Since families tend to hold negative views of obesity (Thompson & Zaitchik, 2012), family pressure for thinness likely emerges in conversations about food. In addition, children are acutely aware of parental struggles surrounding body image and food, which can lead to increased sensitivity in their personal choices (Thompson & Zaitchik, 2012). Co-rumination is positively correlated with purging and bingeing behaviors, as women who engage in negative self-talk are at a greater risk for unhealthy patterns of behavior (Arroyo et al., 2017). With the persisting nature of memorable messages, a negative message could contribute to such negative self-talk. Although most research on self-esteem and food focus on women, the fact that men do experience pressures for thinness from families requires more attention (Sheldon, 2010). With memorable messages persisting and influential to individuals, it is important to identify the long-term impact such messages have on self-esteem.

**RQ2:** Do female-identifying and male-identifying individuals differ in their self-esteem?

## Method

This study aimed to explore the memorable messages an individual received about food. Specifically, this study investigates what type of memorable message was received by the child from their parent or guardian, the message valence, and how this message impacts self-esteem and worth. This section will focus on the research design, sample, and measures explicated to complete this study.

### Research Design

This study was conducted through administration of an online survey via Qualtrics. Students enrolled in communication courses at a Midwestern university accessed the link for the survey through the university research pool. The survey was completed anonymously, and participants received course credit for their participation. Students received 2% of their course grade by completing the survey, or an alternative assignment. All participants were informed of their rights as a research participant and consented to participate in accordance with the IRB guidelines.

### Participants

This study used an online survey methodology to answer the hypotheses and research question. Participants ( $n = 147$ ) were sampled through convenience sampling using the university research pool. Participant ages ranged from 18 - 24 ( $M = 19.18$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ). Participants' year in school included first year/freshman ( $n = 80$ , 54%), second year/sophomore ( $n = 40$ , 27%), third year/junior ( $n = 16$ , 10%), fourth year/senior ( $n = 8$ , 5%), fifth year/super senior ( $n = 2$ , 1%), and other ( $n = 1$ , .7%). Participants identified as female ( $n = 77$ , 52%), male ( $n = 65$ , 44%), transgender male ( $n = 1$ , .7%), intersex ( $n = 1$ , .7%), gender queer ( $n = 2$ , 1%), and gender fluid ( $n = 1$ , .7%). Participants race/ethnicity included Caucasian/White ( $n = 133$ , 90%), African American/Black ( $n = 8$ , 5.4%), Native Hawaiian or Alaskan ( $n = 1$ , .7%), Hispanic/Latino/a ( $n = 4$ , 2.7%), Middle Eastern/Arab American ( $n = 1$ , .7%), and Multi-racial or Multi-ethnic ( $n = 2$ , 1.4%).

### Measures

The survey questionnaire was divided into three parts. In the first part of the survey, participants were asked to answer an open-ended question regarding a memorable message they received from a parent or guardian about food. The second part asked the participants to address how this message impacted their self-esteem. Lastly, demographic questions were posed.

#### *Memorable Message*

After providing the participants with the definition of a memorable message (Stohl, 1986) and two examples of memorable messages (Kranstuber et al., 2012), we asked the participants to "Recall a memorable message about food you have received from a parent or guardian. Please write this memorable message that you have been told about food." After answering this question, the participants were asked to identify the message giver. Participants identified that messages came most often from their mother ( $n = 89$ , 60.5%), father ( $n = 30$ , 20.4%), stepmother ( $n = 1$ , .7%), stepfather ( $n = 1$ , .7%), grandmother ( $n = 18$ , 12.2%), grandfather ( $n = 1$ , .7%), or other ( $n = 7$ , 4.8%).

#### *Self-Esteem and Self-Worth*

Self-esteem was measured using Rosenberg's (1989) Self-Esteem Scale. This scale includes 10-items with a 7-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree*. This scale contains positive and negative feelings about the self. Example questions include: "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself," "I feel I do not have much to be proud of," and "I take a positive attitude toward myself" ( $M = 4.76$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ,  $\alpha = .91$ ).

## Data Analysis

### *Memorable Food Messages Themes*

To answer the first research question in this study, the authors generated themes for the memorable messages about food. The data set allowed for natural emergence of the themes through an inductive analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and through using Owen's (1984) criteria of "(1) recurrence, (2) repetition, and (3) forcefulness" (p. 275). Using the method that Rubinsky et al. (2018) used for data analysis, the authors read through the memorable message data and created their own themes. After the messages were coded with their themes, the authors came together in person and compared their themes for the messages. Through theme comparison, the authors then generated themes that represented the data set.

After the themes were established, the authors created a codebook to categorize and explain the themes of the memorable messages. Each author was assigned to code all of the data. For the coding of the memorable messages, Cohen's kappa revealed a good reliability ( $k = .77$ ). The themes are reported below and reflect agreement between the authors.

## Results

### Parental Gender Identity and Memorable Messages

To answer hypothesis one, which stated that female-identifying parents or guardians more frequently send memorable messages surrounding food, compared to male-identifying counterparts, a frequency analysis was conducted. The analysis discovered that female-identifying parents or guardians more frequently sent memorable messages surrounding food that individual's gender identity [female ( $n = 109$ , 74.1%), male ( $n = 34$ , 23.1%), Gender Queer ( $n = 1$ , .7%), and other ( $n = 2$ , 1.4%)]. Thus, hypothesis one was supported.

### Memorable Food Messages

The research question aimed to investigate what types of memorable messages about food college students recall receiving from their parents or guardians. Through our analysis we produced six themes: *food as fuel*; *portion control*; *food as pleasure*; *food as economic/privilege*; *you are what you eat*; and *body image*. Seven messages were deleted because their memorable messages were not about food and one participant could not recall a memorable message. The memorable messages that the participants recalled were from their mother ( $n = 89$ , 60.5%).

#### *Food as Fuel*

The theme that was the most prevalent was messages regarding food as being fuel ( $n = 43$ , 29.5%). Food is fuel messages refer to messages that describe food as aiding in individual productivity in accomplishing daily tasks, making one strong or healthy, and eating the right foods will make one feel good. Example messages that participants recalled hearing include: "My mom always told me to eat well to make my body feel well (Participant 6); "Fruits and vegetables help you grow!" (Participant 76); "Drink your milk for strong bones" (Participant 89); and "You don't have to do anything to deserve food, you could lay in bed all day, you could have eaten a lot, you could have messed up, but that doesn't mean you don't deserve to eat, you need it to survive" (Participant 142). These messages describe how food is important because it fuels your body through nutrients, can make you strong, help in one's performance, and leads to one's overall well-being.

### ***Portion Control***

The second most prevalent theme about food was messages about portion control ( $n = 32$ , 21.9%). These messages refer to the amount of food one is eating, what food to avoid, and making sure to eat. Example messages include: “No, you can't have a snack, just chug a thing of water” (Participant 16); “I was always told by my parents to stop eating after having one serving of food, rather than to stop eating when I was full” (Participant 47); “Moderation is key. While eating healthy is important, it is also important to watch how much you eat” (Participant 78); and “Your eyes are bigger than your stomach” (Participant 78). These messages describe the different viewpoints controlling and not controlling what one's eating.

### ***Food as Pleasure***

Food as pleasure messages ( $n = 28$ , 19.2%) refer to food being enjoyable, that trying new foods is important, and that recipes and how to prepare food is important. Example messages include: “Count memories, not calories” (Participant 50); “You'll never be on your deathbed regretting that you ate that slice of cake” (Participant 70); “I'd rather eat pasta and drink wine than be a size 0” (Participant 74); and “Food is a great form of self-expression and art that can connect people and places and time” (Participant 127). Food is something that individuals recall being told that food is enjoyable and is viewed as something pleasurable in their life.

### ***Food as Economic/Privilege***

Food as economic/privilege was the third most prevalent message participants recalled hearing ( $n = 18$ , 12.3%). These messages refer to food being something you are not to waste because people may not have the privilege of food. Example messages include: “Be grateful for your food, some kids don't have it as easy as you” (Participant 7); “Don't spend money on food, make food at home” (Participant 24); “Make sure to waste as little food as possible, there are starving people in the world who would love to have a meal like that” (Participant 51); and “You always need to finish your food, otherwise it's a waste” (Participant 99). These messages reflect the value food plays economically as a privilege to individuals in society.

### ***You Are What You Eat***

Message about being you are what you eat ( $n = 13$ , 8.9%) refers to how eating healthy or eating poorly makes you that food, or your value increases/decreases alongside of your choices. Example messages include: “You are what you eat” (Participants 21, 112, 118, 129, 132, 140, 144, 147); “What you eat can reflect how you live” (Participant 40); “You should try not to eat so unhealthy, it will affect you later in life” (Participant 105); and “If you eat a balanced diet and drink more water, you'll feel like a better person” (Participant 128). These messages reflect how the food one chooses to eat plays a role in one's health.

### ***Body Image***

Food messages that participants recalled hearing reflect messages about body image ( $n = 12$ , 8.2%). These messages made reference to individual body size (i.e., skinny, fat, weight, etc.) and how the food would impact their body appearance. Example messages include: “Don't eat too much your freshman year that's how all my friends got fat” (Participant 23); “You are too skinny. You need to eat more” (Participant 56); “People don't like a girl that eats that much” (Participant 82); and “If you eat that you'll blow up and be as big as a house” (Participant 109). These messages vary, but overall, they show how certain food can hinder one's body and how eating affects individual bodies.

### **Gender Identity and Self-Esteem**

To address research question two, we conducted an independent-sample  $t$ -test to compare self-esteem of female-identifying individuals and male-identifying individuals. There was no significant

difference in self-esteem between female identifying individuals ( $M = 4.66$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) and male identifying individuals ( $M = 4.92$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ );  $t(137) = 1.32$ ,  $p = .10$  (two-tailed). Thus, female-identifying and male-identifying individuals probably do not differ in self-esteem.

## Discussion

The primary goal of this study was to examine what memorable messages about food are recalled by students from their parents or guardians and see the impacts of these messages on self-esteem and gender identity. Largely, responding to the growing awareness of food neutrality, this study sought to explore how food is communicated in the family, revealing that food is a neutral topic among children and their parents/guardians. The findings revealed six main themes, *food as fuel*; *portion control*; *food as pleasure*; *food as economic/privilege*; *you are what you eat*; and *body image*, regarding the messages parents provide their children about food. Female-identifying parents or guardians were the most frequent givers of memorable messages about food. Additionally, the findings revealed no significant relationship between memorable food messages and self-esteem. Furthermore, the findings revealed no significant difference between gender identity and self-esteem. The following paragraphs will focus on the parental role, memorable messages, and self-esteem.

This study reinforces previous research positioning women as prominent memorable message senders. In particular, female-identifying individuals commonly cite their mothers as memorable message senders (Rubinsky et al., 2019). In addition, women often ‘do the tradition’ of domestic tasks in the home, which is why Baiocchi-Wagner and Olson (2016) differentiate women as responsible for family *healthcare*, whereas men engage in *healthplay*. Our results position female-identifying parents or guardians, and mothers in particular, as the primary sender of memorable messages surrounding food, supporting previous findings.

This study sought to understand what types of memorable messages surrounding food are given in a parent-child dyad. Our results produced six themes of memorable messages. Although memorable messages do commonly form an if/then or rule-based content and form (Knapp et al., 1981), and health messages geared toward behavior can fall under such structure (Cooke-Jackson & Rubinsky, 2019), only one theme focused on rules of consumption: *portion control*. Our findings provide an initial understanding of the memorable messages given in parent-child communication surrounding food. In fact, two of the three most prominent themes in this study align with understandings of food neutrality. The themes ‘Food as Fuel’ and ‘Food as Pleasure’ collectively compose 48.7 percent, nearly half, of respondent’s recalled messages. Surprisingly, the theme ‘body image’ was the least prominent theme in our study. Compared to other memorable message studies that explore socially stigmatizing topics, like weight or disordered eating patterns, our study found that when prompted to recall messages on food, respondents overwhelmingly recall neutral messages. This finding warrants further investigation into family conversations on food through the lens of food neutrality.

Our results do not support a significant connection between self-esteem and the memorable message recalled, or between gender identity and self-esteem. In line with prominent neutral themes, the non-significant relationship between self-esteem and the memorable message recalled, as well as self-esteem and gender identity, is interesting, as food neutrality would insulate individuals from stigmatizing comments on food choices. Although research indicates that female-identifying individuals experience more family pressure surrounding food, and family pressure is strongly correlated with low esteem in women (Arroyo et al., 2017; Sheldon, 2010), our study found no connection between the memorable message and esteem. In addition, research indicates female-identifying individuals engage in more co-rumination and experience more social pressure surrounding their bodies (Sheldon, 2010; Arroyo et al., 2017). While Sheldon (2010) encourages more research investigating the impact of family pressure on the self-esteem of men, this study found no significance between gender identity and self-esteem. Based on our findings, we encourage more research to be conducted into the differences surrounding gender identity and self-esteem, connected to gender norms and stereotypes.



## **Limitations**

This study contributes to the literature and research surrounding memorable messages by looking at how messages about food impact individual self-esteem. Through our analysis, the findings give a greater insight into the messages that college students recall hearing from their parent or guardian. The main message senders identified by the participants were female-identifying mothers, and the messages were ones that regarded 'food as fuel.' This study gives insight into this area of research but there are limitations to this study.

First, the sample was mostly white. This limitation is common to research conducted at U.S. universities and requires structural address amongst researchers as a whole (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2021). Having a more diverse sample would allow for a richer understanding of the memorable messages about food individuals recall receiving.

Second, this study did not ask the participants to indicate their perception of the message they received (i.e., positive, negative, or neutral). Asking them their perception of the message valence would allow for better understanding of how the messages impact their self-esteem. This would further reinforce previous literature surrounding memorable messages and their impact on individuals' self-perception, giving insight into how memorable messages can hinder or support individual self-esteem.

Lastly, example memorable messages were given to the participants to help them understand what a memorable message was. Due to the examples, participants did not answer the prompt appropriately which led to removal of seven participants. For example, we provided two memorable messages from Kranstuber et al. (2012), a study on memorable messages about college, so two participants provided messages about college, instead of food. This is a limitation because we lost out on members of our sample. In addition, if participants struggled to conceptualize what a memorable message was in their life, we suspect they provided comments that noted healthy food, eating well, etc. for social desirability. Since 'Food is Fuel' proved to be the most common theme of messages, and this theme included messages about healthy eating, more research should aim to emphasize the characteristics of memorable messages to prevent similar, potential responses for desirability.

## **Future Directions**

First, future research should examine the self-reported valence of the message, to understand the relationship between solicited and unsolicited messages and their positive or negative reception. In addition, an understanding of message valence and the impact on self-esteem more holistically can extend the current research on food neutrality. This aids in understanding how memorable messages about food can lead to understanding individual self-esteem impart to how messages received impact individuals in the future.

Contrary to existing research, our results do not indicate a significant difference between gender identity and self-esteem, as well as gender-identity. Future studies should examine the relationships between gender identity and similar constructs, like self-esteem, to identify if the non-significance found in this study indicates broader shifts in gender stereotypes or coherence to gendered norms that may provide new insights about gender differences.

Lastly, studies should go beyond the United States to see if there are similarities or differences in the memorable message themes. Food is an important component to the world globally when it comes to attainability, agriculture, and beyond. Through continuing this study beyond the United States, one could understand what is similar and different about the food messages provided by parents or guardians, as well as the conceptualization of 'food' globally.

## **Conclusion**

Food is understood as being a neutral topic, in that food is not ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ but is something that fuels one’s body. However, messages about food, when stigmatizing, leave a lasting impact on individuals when it comes to their food choices. Research regarding memorable messages have looked at the implications of messages surrounding body image, health, and education. This present study extends the memorable message research into a new area looking at memorable messages about food. We learned that food memorable messages are mostly about food being fuel, and that female-identifying mothers are the frequent providers of memorable messages about food. Gender identity did not lead to differences in self-esteem. However, the findings reinforce that memorable messages are impactful to one’s perception of food and provides an introductory understanding of food neutrality in family and health communication research.

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