

[Research]

Dissonance between Christian Beliefs and Eating Habits in the South

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Introduction and Need for Research

Food choices are one of the most frequent human behaviors (Köster, 2006). In the southern region of the U.S., where poor food choices are rampant, leading to obesity, an interdisciplinary approach is a necessity to improve marketing communication campaigns as well as educational efforts to aid in nutritional, healthy lifestyle choices and stop the rapid increase of obesity rates (ten Hoor et al., 2017). Both food companies and organizations that educate consumers about nutrition now face more competition than ever to be seen by consumers (Marshall, 2020). While there is a level of effectiveness in using demographics to develop and messages for targeted audiences, much demographic targeting is still reliant on assumption (Quick, 2017). Christians in the Bible Belt are a good example. Society and politics in the Bible Belt are heavily driven by evangelical Protestantism. Acknowledging that such religious doctrine recognized by followers to be fully true and authoritative (Englehart, 2020), it would be logical to market healthy and nutritional food options to accommodate those Biblically-motivated preferences (Rainbolt et al., 2012); however, the southern United States, despite its religious reputation, has developed a high rate of obesity. A USDA (2013) study provided clear evidence that well-designed nutrition education programs can reduce obesity by leading students to healthier and more informed food choices. Therefore, communicators and educators need to understand their audience through more than just religious stereotypes in order to be truly effective with marketing and educational message development.

This study sought 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. The study was guided by 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? and (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?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by Festinger's (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory, which 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. People have an inner drive to hold attitudes and behavior in harmony and avoid disharmony (or dissonance). Therefore, humans are motivated to reduce inconsistency by altering some part of the cognitive system, which often results in changing of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, or by justifying or rationalizing them. This study explored the inconsistencies between unhealthy eating behavior of Christians in the South and their attitudes about Biblical content regarding food and health.

Methodology

This was a qualitative, descriptive study with a phenomenological approach, employing semi-structured field interviews as a data collection method (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Eleven participants were purposively selected (Patton, 2002). Data analysis included identifying recurring themes, patterns, or concepts and then describing and translating those categories (Huberman & Miles, 2009). Qualitative rigor was ensured by employing two coders and reaching an acceptable level of inter-coder reliability of 85.29% (Guest et al., 2012).

Findings

The Bible Belt Christians in this study revealed a cognitive dissonance between their beliefs and their eating habits. The interview transcripts displayed the beliefs of these southern Christians had regarding the Bible and its expectations for their lives and dietary lives. However, when sharing reasons why Christians choose the foods that they do, no participant referenced their scriptural instruction or belief system when making decisions about meals. Most of the participants also admitted to gluttony in their own lifestyles. This revealed an awareness of the dissonance among these Christians in the South and their beliefs.

Conclusions

An overwhelming number of these participants revealed that they understood the purpose of food to be survival and sustenance. Food was also credited with being the reason for which people come together. Furthermore, some participants in this study described food as a key element in recruiting people to events of all kinds. Another conclusion was that, 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. Also, 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. Still, all affirmed the Bible as inerrant. They identified themes in the Bible regarding food, such as “the body is a temple” and gluttony; however, despite already discussing Biblical contexts of food, health, and various dietary decisions, no participants mentioned healthy or nutritional lifestyle choices as a characteristic of a God-honoring lifestyle. Interestingly, 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. Instead, factors like taste and desirability were the primary reason for purchase and consumption. Finally, 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. Church culture and southern culture were both mentioned as positive rationale in the issue of overeating, pointing to a common theme of rationalizing eating habits to resolve the dissonance.

Recommendations

When southern Christians are the target market, this study implies that communication campaigns and marketing practitioners should 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.

It is also recommended that educators consider the religious experiences of the majority of children in the Bible Belt. Educators should earnestly strive to transform the reasoning behind food choice from taste and desirability to health and nutritional value.

Extension educators should develop curriculum that considers the religion of the majority of the South (evangelical Protestant Christianity) and the cognitive dissonance that is present among some of those Christians when it comes to their eating habits. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to present adult consumers with curriculum that incorporates the taste and desirability of healthy and nutritious foods, as this was the major deciding factor in what foods the participants selected.

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