

# Food Equals Love





# Food Equals Love



## Connecting What's Now to What's Next

We've been taught from birth to equate food with love.

As children, we were rewarded with treats when we met our parents' expectations (e.g., report cards with all A's) and consoled with food after bad experiences (e.g., visit to the doctor). We bond over food and use it to celebrate. Food manufacturers and restaurant businesses intuitively understand this connection but lack clear direction on how to best leverage this relationship.

For example, when advertising food, should the communication be from the perspective of the food giver, the recipient, or both? What specific emotions should be emphasized? What should be the backdrop of such communications (e.g., personal or social situations)? Are some foods more likely to trigger emotions than others?

Most importantly, are food brands and restaurant businesses part of this **Food Equals Love** equation?



# The Food/Love Relationship

At Ipsos, we believe that understanding emotions is vital to fully understanding the consumer. We answer the aforementioned questions and provide our perspective on the implications of the findings for food manufacturers and restaurant businesses.

We find, for example, that the food/love relationship is mediated by memories of past events, especially those involving loved ones. We find also that some foods are more likely to become equated with love than others. Sweet foods, in particular, seem more likely to become part of our emotional memories.

Finally, we also find that “love” is not a single homogeneous emotion, but one that can range from the pure emotional enjoyment of food to those experienced when we partake with others (e.g., a sense of belonging, a sense of conviviality). These findings provide clear directions on how we can better leverage the **Food Equals Love** equation.

## Methodology

To answer these questions, we asked 173 consumers from our Ipsos online social space community to discuss the topic of food and emotions.

We analyzed the verbatims via text analytics and share our findings in this document. The learnings illustrate how text mining provides rich and quantifiable consumer insights.

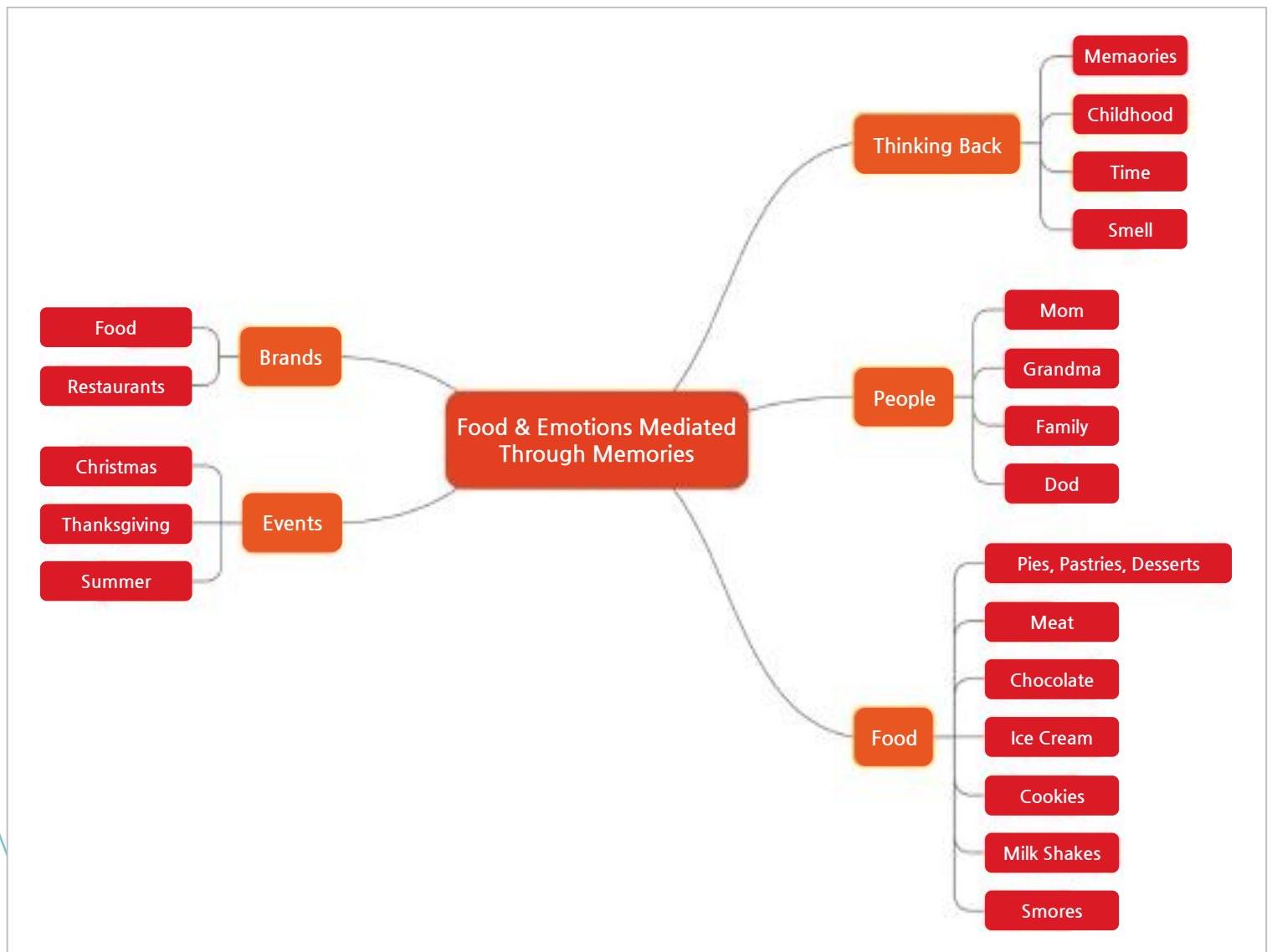
While survey research using closed-ended questions remain the dominant approach for understanding consumers, we believe the future of research will be shaped by our ability to collect responses from consumers in an open-ended format and to extract insights from these responses (Ho, 2012).

# The Food/Love Relationship

## Mediating the Connection Between Food and Love

We find that memories mediate the connection between food and emotions (see Figure 1). The online discussions were dominated by memories of childhood, an earlier time, of certain smells, people, foods, events and also of food brands and restaurant businesses.

Figure 1. Themes Extracted From Community Discussion



# The Food/Love Relationship

The idea that food is closely connected with memories has been captured in a recent book by John Allen (the Omnivorous Mind, 2012). Allen discusses how we are hardwired to remember rewarding food experiences.

Evolutionarily, if we can remember rewarding food events, we are more likely to survive. The premise is that we would be able to better find rewarding food (again) if we remember the event where we previously consumed the food.

The specific contents of memories that mediate the relationship between food and emotions provide clear directions for how marketers can leverage the food/love equation. These memories were almost all from a recipient's perspective. That is, the memories are from the point of view of the person eating the food, not the perspective of the giver. This finding is in sharp contrast to most commercials that emphasize the giver's perspective, or the giver-recipient connection.

The emphasis on the giver is understandable as the giver is also often the purchaser. However, if the connection between food and emotion is driven by what we experienced as a recipient, commercials or advertising from the point of view of a recipient may be more effective at triggering emotions.

Many of these memories involve significant others: Specifically, mothers and grandmothers and more broadly, the immediate family. Certainly, emotions can also be experienced in situations without the presence of others (e.g., pure enjoyment of food). The memories in the online discussion, however, are dominated by those where loved ones were present. So, when it comes to positioning or communicating food, mother and grandmother figures play a key role. It is perhaps no surprise that many manufacturers and restaurant businesses use moms and grandmother figures in their communications (e.g., Frito Lay's Grandma's cookies).

Events also figure prominently in people's food/love memories. Christmas and Thanksgiving are two events that stand out. This is not surprising as these two events bring people together and typically involve food (lots of it). Perhaps less expected is the emergence of "summer" as an event that stood out in people's memories involving food and emotions. We hypothesize that the inclusion of summer as an event mediating the relationship between food and emotion likely develops during childhood. For kids, summer means being out of school, family vacations, cold treats (e.g., ice cream), and endless days of sunshine!

# The Food/Love Relationship

But not all foods are created equal when it comes to forming emotional memories. The results show that foods higher in sugar and carbohydrates are more frequently mentioned as triggering emotions and/or memories. Pies, pastries, desserts, ice-cream, cookies, milk shakes and s'mores dominate the list of foods mentioned. These foods appear to have a disproportionate chance at being associated with positive emotions.

Allen proposes that foods high in sugar may be better remembered as we have a natural sweet tooth. Foods high in sugar activate the release of dopamine, which in turn, regulates the reward centers in the brain and impact the development of memory. So, when it comes to sweet foods, there may be ample opportunities to evoke positive memories, their associated emotions, and to associate them with brands. **There was one non-sweet exception:** meats. We return to this food item later with more details.

Finally and most importantly, specific consumer packaged brands as well as restaurant businesses are part of consumers' emotional memories.

**The consumer packaged goods brands mentioned are established brands and mostly from sweet categories, although comfort food brands are also mentioned:**

Cookies/crackers (Oreo, Ritz, Goldfish, Debbie's Apple Cookies), comfort food (Kraft's Mac & Cheese, Campbell's soup) and candies/chocolates (M&M, Hershey, Skittles, Snickers, Dove, Roche). Restaurant businesses mentioned include well-known companies like McDonalds, Dairy Queen and Starbucks. There were also mentions of unspecified pizza and ice-cream restaurants.

# The Food/Love Relationship

## To Love is to Belong

If food equals love, what makes up “love”? To answer this question, we analyzed the discussion using a motivational framework Ipsos uses to help clients grow their brands. This framework, known as Censydiam, postulates eight motivational needs that drive behavior (see Figure 2). It should be noted that even though these eight motivations are presented separately in our framework, people likely experience multiple emotions simultaneously in social situations (e.g., Enjoyment, Conviviality and Belonging).

Figure 2. Censydiam Framework



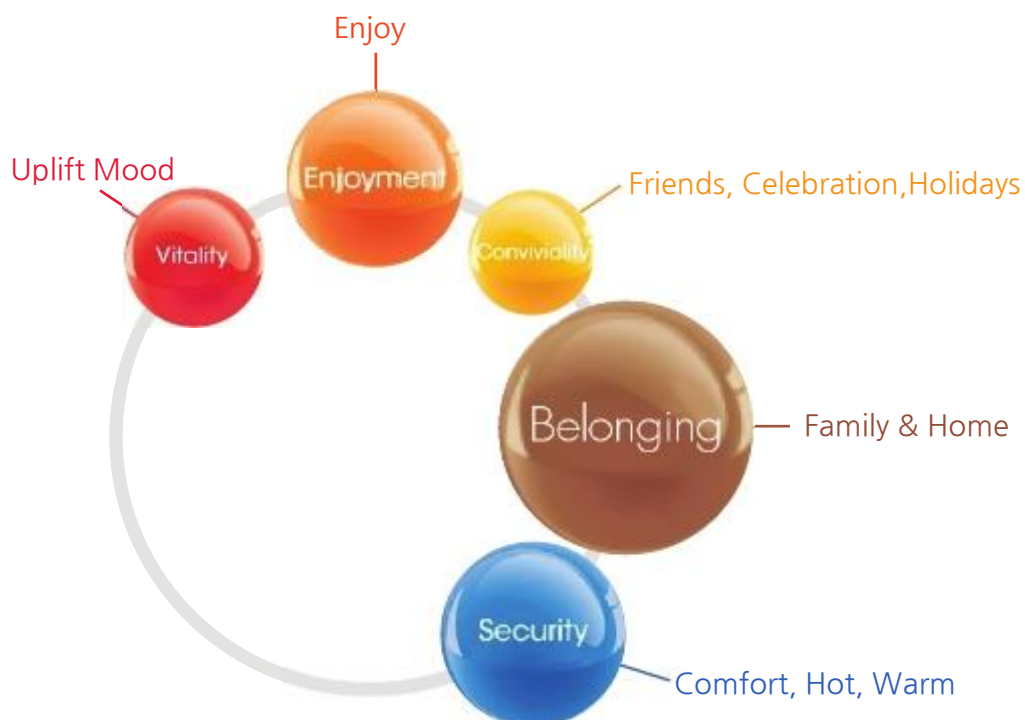
# The Food/Love Relationship

Verbatim from the online discussion were classified into the eight motivational factors (see Figure 3).

Three motivational needs were absent from our online community discussion: Power, Recognition and Control. Among the remaining five motivational needs, Belonging dominated. In general, the results of this analysis show that “love” is dominated by the more socially oriented motivational needs (i.e., Belonging, Conviviality, Security). To experience emotions during the consumption of food and for it to be firmly imprinted in our memories, it appears that the presence of others, in particular loved ones, is required. This suggests the best window of opportunity to build an emotional connection with consumers is during social occasions, particularly those with loved ones.

In addition to the three more socially oriented motivational needs, however, two more personal and less socially dependent motivational needs also emerged: Enjoyment and Vitality. These two motivational needs play a role because of foods’ inherent hedonic and mood-lifting benefits. The presence of these less socially reliant motivational needs suggests that lasting memories and the emotions associated with food can also develop in the absence of a social context, although this is less likely to occur.

Figure 3. Emotions from Community Discussion using the Censydiam Framework



# The Food/Love Relationship

## The Connection Between Food, Emotions and Events

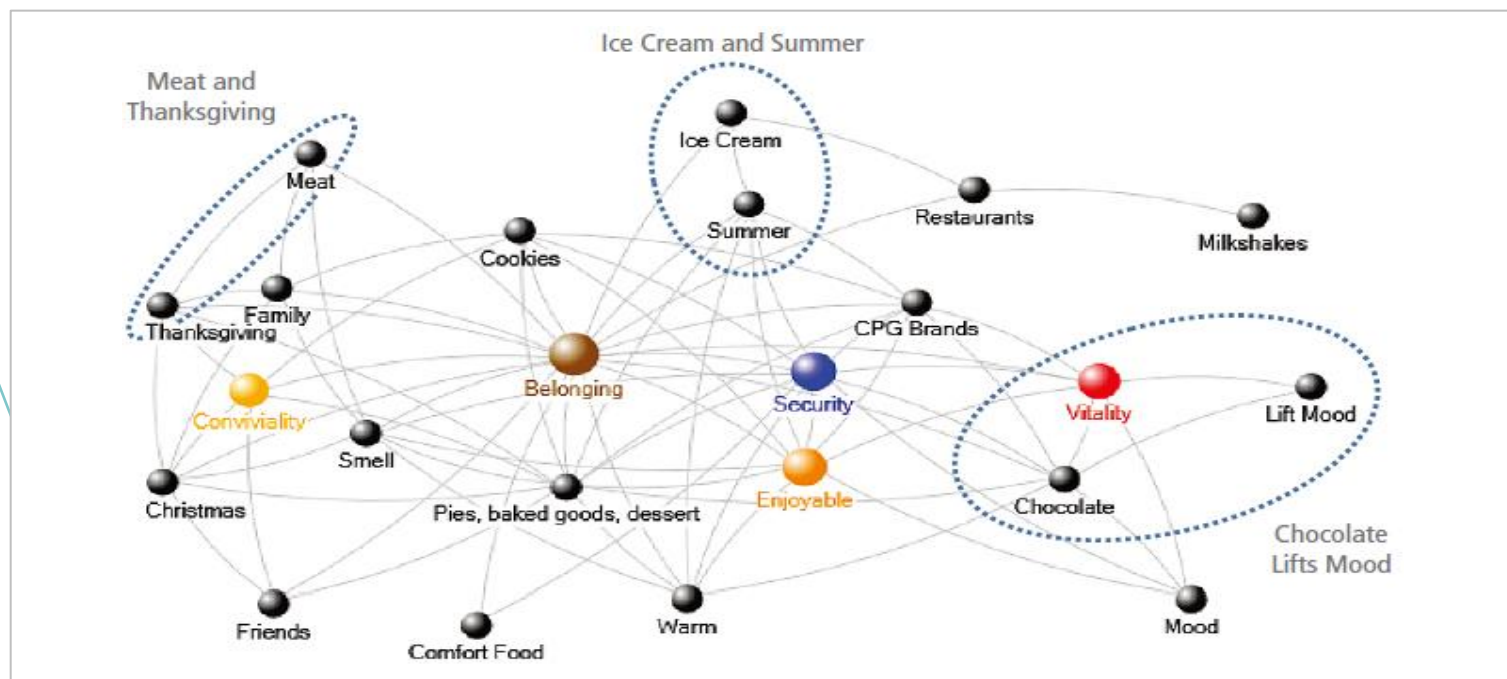
Thus far, we have looked at the themes extracted from the online discussion separately, without analyzing the connections between them. To provide insights into how the themes may be interrelated, we ran an association analysis between the themes extracted (see Figure 4). While there are many associations we can explore, for the sake of brevity, we point out only a few key findings (highlighted by blue connecting lines).

The first, towards the right of Figure 4, is that the uplifting mood effects of food (i.e., Vitality) are most associated with chocolates. Intuitively, this makes sense and confirms that there are foods that are less reliant on a social context to trigger emotions. Eating chocolates and experiencing its mood benefits can be done in isolation, and this isolation may even be desirable considering social norms of over-indulgence and eating healthy.

Second, the one non-sweet food item that emerged in consumers' memories, meat, is associated with Thanksgiving (top left of chart). So, while meat did emerge as a key food, its role in emotions and memories may be restricted to traditional holidays.

Finally, we highlight another food's connection to an event. Looking at ice-cream (top center), we see that this food is associated with summer. The aforementioned associations all illustrate the complex interactions between specific foods, events and motivational needs/emotions. When attempting to leverage the food and emotion connection, we need to consider all the elements together.

Figure 4. Associations between Themes from Community Discussions



# The Food/Love Relationship

## Bon Appetit

So, what does this all mean? Clearly, food is more than physical sustenance. When we partake with significant others, food takes on a greater meaning. The specific food, event, people and emotions triggered during consumption become part of our memories and influences how we view food in the future. Where you ate your first meal with your spouse or significant other, for example, is likely clearly remembered and will influence how you view the same food in the future.

The flavor pyramid proposed by Steven Kaun (2005) posits just this influence. Kaun (2005) proposes that when we encounter any food, we start with our emotional perceptions of the food. These perceptions come from all past experiences we have had with the food. It is only after this initial emotional reaction to food that the other more sensory factors kick in: appearance, smell, and if we choose to partake, texture, sensation and taste.

If the past can impact the future, then food manufacturers and restaurant businesses should do all they can to ensure the influence on the future is a positive one. Restaurant businesses have a particular advantage when it comes to ensuring that memories of their food are positive and generate positive emotions.

We often eat out to celebrate special occasions (e.g., birthdays, anniversaries, Valentine's day). Getting consumers in for those special occasions is not only a plus for revenue but has an additional bonus of being favorably imprinted in consumers' memories.

For example, the fact that Red Robin was one of the first restaurants I dined with my spouse has left a long lasting positive association for that restaurant. Of course, even "ordinary" eating occasions can be turned into something extraordinary with great food, excellent service and a physical environment (e.g., temperature, color, lighting, seating arrangement) that helps people meet their motivational needs. The gathering of people in one location to eat will always be an opportunity to generate positive emotions and memories. Food manufacturers can similarly help consumers develop good memories and emotions by positioning their foods for sharing or celebrating with loved ones.

In addition to Thanksgiving and Christmas, family barbeques/picnics and birthday celebrations are also opportunities where the food/love connection can be developed.

# The Food/Love Relationship

Of course, we want to do more than just shape the future. We want to impact what already exists today. And to do this, we must understand how consumers' view food and love today.

The findings in this paper, in essence, provide a snapshot of consumers' food memories and the associated emotions as they are today. As illustrated, a deep understanding of the food/love equation can provide insight into how to leverage these food-related memories and the components that make up those memories (e.g., people, events). We have already spoken at lengths in terms of how food manufacturers can provide effective advertising/communication by ensuring that the essential elements of food/love memories are considered and used (i.e., perspective of the food giver, people involved, context).

In addition to communication, however, food manufacturers can also determine if food portions and packaging can be optimized to enhance the food sharing experience. For example, to encourage sharing, Ghirardelli recently introduced individually wrapped chocolates squares with the tag line "Share a square."

Finally, while we have focused mostly on the social aspects, it is worth reiterating that the pure enjoyment of food can be experienced in a non-social context. While the food/love equation appears to be strongly influenced and driven by social events, the pure enjoyment of food remains part of that equation and likely forms the foundation for the more socially oriented motivations. If food does not taste good, then other emotions like a sense of belonging will not be able to build upon the food. Good tasting food will always remain the foundation which other emotions can build upon. To that, we say **Bon Appetit!**

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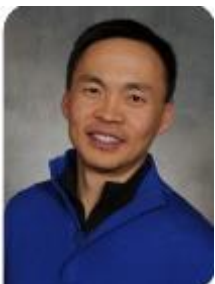
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# Thank You!



## GAME CHANGERS

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