

What psychoanalysis can tell economists about food consumption

William Kaye-Blake

AERU, Lincoln University, PO Box 84, Lincoln 7647

Bill.Kaye-Blake@lincoln.ac.nz, DDI 03 321 8274

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Abstract

New Zealand, like other industrialised societies, is afflicted with food anxiety that manifests as an obesity epidemic, fixation on specific food issues (transfats, antioxidants), and self-imposed food regimes. For the field of economics, this is a perverse result: consumption is supposed to produce satisfaction, not anxiety. In addition, economics assumes that choices are made with pre-existing and fixed preferences, and so removes consumer agency and thus the possibility of anxiety.

This paper discusses research on the possibility of using psychoanalytical theory to frame consumption and anxiety in the market for food. Based on work by Jacques Lacan, Jeanne Schroeder, and others, the paper posits that the market is a place of desire. Individuals achieve intersubjective relations mediated by the objects of their desire exchanged in markets. However, the central relation is not between a subject and an object – an individual and food – but between the person and the social/symbolic order. In the case of food, this social/symbolic order is the sum of dietary restrictions and recommendations that fill the popular press. This relationship produces desire for objects, but is also the source of anxiety. The anxiety is the result of individuals' incomplete identification with the order that structures their consumption.

Introduction

In New Zealand, consumers appear to have an underlying anxiety about food, which manifests as an obesity epidemic, fixation on specific food issues (transfats, antioxidants), and self-imposed food regimes (Dixon & Broom, 2007; Fischler, 1993; Pollan, 2006). The standard economic model does not describe how this situation could arise. For economics, consumers maximise their utility, given their preferences for goods or their attributes, bearing in mind the constraints of income and other resources (Deaton & Muellbauer, 1980; McFadden, 2001). For food consumption, consumers have preferences either for certain foods or certain qualities of food (calories, crunchiness, etc.), and they obtain the basket of food that provides the greatest satisfaction, given the amount of time and money (and possibly cognitive ability) they have available.

Preferences are central to this calculus. Preferences are considered fixed and stable, and their formation is generally considered outside the scope of economics (*de gustibus non est disputandum* (Stigler & Becker, 1977)). One justification for ignoring preference formation has been that it is not important for modelling the market (Deaton & Muellbauer, 1980; McFadden, 2001). Regardless of the origin of preferences, they exist and determine demand. How these preferences arise or are formed, it is argued, do not affect market outcomes. Preferences have thus been explicitly treated as a ‘black box’ (McFadden, 1986): there are inputs (information about options) and outputs (purchases), and economists need merely to create mathematical measurements that reproduce observed behaviour (Broome, [1991] 1996). Furthermore, even where anomalies or strategies can be observed, it has been argued that economics can uncover the deeper preferential structures that give rise to apparent choice heuristics (McFadden, 2001). There are economists (Earl, 1983; Earl & Potts, 2004; Rabin, 2002) who suggest that how preferences are formed affects what is preferred or purchased and thus market outcomes – that preference formation is economically relevant – but theirs is not the mainstream view.

Food anxiety has been traced to the fact that humans, as omnivores with cognition, must consider their choices when selecting what to eat (Fischler, 1993; Pollan, 2006). Because they are omnivores, humans require a diverse diet from a range of plant and animal sources. Each new food that they sample, however, presents the potential for life-sustaining nutrients or sickness or death. Their cognitive power means that humans are aware of options and their ramifications and can make conscious choices (as opposed to instinctual ones) about what to consume. The issue is compounded by the special nature of food, as something that we take into ourselves and becomes part of us. Humans have evolved food cultures or diets as a way of passing on accumulated food knowledge and reducing the anxiety associated with the omnivore’s dilemma. Modern food anxieties have been

traced to a disruption of food cultures, which in turn puts the onus of deciding what to eat back on the individual consumer (Fischler, 1993).

With or without food cultures, one cannot make sense of this anxiety with the standard consumer model. If choices are made with pre-existing and fixed preferences, then there is no possibility that food consumption could be other than it is. Without consumer agency – the ability to create a new choice – there is no possibility of anxiety.

The root of the problem is that the standard economic model is flat, in the sense that Massumi (1992) and Copjec (1994) understand the term. Consumers are equal to their preferences; any decision-making or subjectivity is incidental. The model exists at the end of time when all preferences are learned and therefore stable. Robinson (1962) made a similar criticism of equilibrium theory: relative prices and rates of return to factors of production can be theoretically determined once all transactions have been made, *i.e.*, at the end of time. Copjec (1994) has pointed to the need for dynamic tension to allow the possibility of agency: 'Fitted out thus with a generative principle, society ceases to be conceived as a dead structure, mappable on some flat surface; society is finally by this means brought to life' (p. 9). For Copjec, the dynamic tension results from a psychoanalytic process described by Lacan, in which individuals are in a dialectical relationship with the social structure around them.

This paper suggests that Lacanian psychoanalytical theory provides a framework for investigating consumption and anxiety in the market for food. Following Schroeder (2004), the market can be viewed as a place of Lacanian desire, in which individuals achieve intersubjective relations mediated by the objects of their desire exchanged in markets. The central relation is not between a subject and an object – an individual and food – but between the subject and the social/symbolic order. This relationship produces desire for objects, but is also the source of anxiety. The anxiety is the result of individuals' incomplete identification with the order that structures their consumption.

The rest of the paper develops and discusses this theory. The next section constructs a theory of the food consumer based on Lacanian concepts of the symbolic order, the split subject, and desire. It discusses the differences between the Lacanian food consumer and the economic one. The paper then presents some alternatives from economics, anthropology, and psychology and discusses their weaknesses in addressing the central issue of food anxiety. The next section considers the implications of a Lacanian perspective for food consumption, policy, and research. The paper then discusses the outline of a research programme that can help economics achieve a more complete understanding of food behaviours. A brief conclusion follows.

A theory of food consumption

To begin to construct a new theory, specific Lacanian constructs can be usefully mapped onto aspects of food consumption. The following lists several key constructs, explains them, and discusses how they could be used to think about food consumption.

- **Symbolic order.** Human beings become subjects when they become part of the symbolic order, the system of language and laws in which humans operate and relate (Lacan, 1981; Schroeder, 2004). This entry creates a split subject, one who misperceives a time when he/she was not split (Lacan, 1981; Schroeder, 2004). Food consumption and culture are highly ordered and heavily symbolic (Fischler, 1993), and may thus be considered part of this social/symbolic order. A key element of a theory of food consumption is considering how people behave in and react to the symbolic order of food.
- **Split subject.** Accession to the symbolic order results in a split subject: subjects feel the impossibility of saying it all (Lacan, 1975) or fully identifying with the symbolic order (Schroeder, 2004). Food consumption as a system or an order functions in the same way: people are conflicted over what to eat (Fischler, 1993; Pollan, 2006). Importantly, their choices do not resolve the conflict – they remain anxious. This result runs counter to an economic model in which filling demand creates satisfaction, and is a facet of food behaviour that a new theory should explain.
- **Desire.** The inability to identify fully with the symbolic order creates the condition of desire, which can be ‘read’ in human behaviour (Copjec, 1994). Desire is the motive force in the market: it determines the price level¹ and generates the rationale for participating in economic activity (Schroeder, 2004). Food consumption, a highly symbolic behaviour performed by people with various levels of identification with the social/symbolic order, must bear traces of this desire.
- **Excess.** A system or order produces its own excess, that which the order does not contain (Copjec, 1994; Lacan, 1981; Schroeder, 2004). Mainstream economics offers an analogue in the Random Utility Model (McFadden, 2001) used for analysing discrete choices data, in which utility (U) is a function of observed (V) and unobserved terms (e):

$$U = V + e.$$

The part of utility that is not structured or observed is the ‘excess’ or error term. However, the analogy is imperfect, as economic research generally considers the error term as potentially

¹ ‘It is the desire, not the satisfaction, that is measured by price’ (Robinson, 1962, p. 49)

observable and certainly mappable onto some distribution. The researcher's assumption about the distribution of the error term in effect imposes a structure on the excess.

- **Repetition.** One of the four fundamental concepts of Lacanian theory is repetition, based on Freud's work (Lacan, 1981). Through repetition, the symbolic order is continually re-established (Schneiderman, 1983). Food behaviours are repeated (Fischler, 1993), and this is true whether the behaviours are beneficial or harmful (Dixon & Broom, 2007).
- **Masculine/feminine modes.** These are modes of relating to the symbolic order (Lacan, 1981; Schroeder, 2004). The masculine mode believes that there is nothing beyond the symbolic order, while the feminine mode accepts that something is left out (Lacan, 1975; Schroeder, 2004). The food consumer may relate to food strictures with these modes. In the masculine mode, the social and scientific knowledge – expert opinion – is complete and trustworthy. From this position, GM food is completely safe, and there is nothing nutritionally superior in organically grown food. In the feminine mode, there is always more to food consumption than the experts report – they do not know it all. Thus, personal decisions about what is safe or acceptable are valid even if they do not conform to scientific findings, because those findings are insufficient.
- **Realtightness.** This is a key point of contention between Deleuzian/Foucauldian and Lacanian theorists (Copjec, 1994; Massumi, 1992). For Foucault, the law produces the transgression, creating a system that is 'realtight' or closed (Copjec, 1994). In Lacanian theory, the law structures behaviour *and* produces an excess, which leaves a residual or an open system (Copjec, 1994; Schroeder, 2004). The subject's relation to food can therefore not be fully captured, which leaves the possibility of consumer agency.

These concepts are the building blocks for an integrated understanding of individual consumers acting within a social/symbolic context to create their own food consumption. When consumers purchase or eat food (and these are two different activities), they are re-establishing the symbolic order through their diets. This is true whether or not the specific food item has been purchased before. If it is an habitual or traditional purchase, then the purchase replicates prior behaviour and thus the symbolic order. If it is a purchase of a new food item, then it negatively reinforces the prior symbolic order (this item is NOT what I have had before). In addition, the performance of the purchase re-inscribes other food-related behaviours, such as where and when the food was purchased, how much it cost, and how the food was selected. This order gives consumers a way to structure their food consumption, which is particularly necessary with regard to food. Without food prescriptions, it would be difficult and potentially deadly to re-examine food choice every time a person wanted to eat.

The order appears to produce an excess, and the perception of an excess leads to consumers feeling unable to fully identify with their own diets. This inability leads then to consumers' desire, in which they long to be fully recognised as subjects by other free subjects. This recognition cannot happen directly, but must be mediated through relationships with objects (Schroeder, 2004), such as the food that is purchased or eaten. In addition, consumers can take one of two positions with regard to the symbolic order and the lost excess (Lacan, 1975). In the masculine position, they believe that there is nothing outside the symbolic order, and seek to identify with it. Preparing and eating meat, for example, can be a way for consumers to assert their identification with the symbolic order (Adams, 1991). In the feminine position, they accept that something is excluded from the symbolic order, and even identify with that which is lost.

This theoretical perspective avoids the problem of creating a realtought model of consumer behaviour, in which consumption decisions are mappable onto stable preferences. Applied economic research has aimed at improving estimates of consumer demand by reducing the amount of variation explained by the residual term in a demand equation (Deaton & Muellbauer, 1980; Hensher, Rose, & Greene, 2005). This approach assumes that the residual arises primarily from measurement error or the researcher's inability to fully observe the consumer (McFadden, 2001). It thus assumes a realtought world that it observes imperfectly. By contrast, the proposed theory follows Lacan in asserting that words fail, language fails, and the symbolic order does not fully contain consumer behaviour.

This framework for discussing food consumption accounts for both satisfaction and anxiety in a way that mainstream economics does not. The food eaten satisfies consumers physically: it provides pleasing tastes, mouthfeel, and aromas, it fills their stomachs, and it provides nutrition for maintaining their bodies. These are attributes of food often researched in marketing and applied economics. The food also allows consumers to participate in a social order, to assert their places in society. These functions of food can be explained in mainstream economics by the symbolic dimensions of consumption² and in Lacanian theory by consumers' desire to participate in the symbolic order. However, as discussed above, mainstream economics cannot account for consumers' anxiety regarding food. It cannot account for consumers worrying about whether they should purchase a specific food item: they should simply calculate its relative utility according to stable preferences, and then determine whether provides sufficient satisfaction to warrant the expense. It also cannot account for the anxiety after consumption, the worry about whether one should have eaten that ice cream or the guilt at 'knowing' that one really should not have.

² Although Veblen (1970[1899]) provided a lucid discussion of this function of consumption over one hundred years ago, the extent of its impact on mainstream economics could be disputed. However, this point will not be taken up here.

The Lacanian theory, however, suggests that consumers engaging in food consumption decisions are considering not just their physical needs but also (and primarily) their relationship to food prescriptions and to other subjects. Some consumers may follow the recommended guidelines as set down by some ministry or organisation, and then experience a sense of loss because they feel that some aspect of their prior, whole self is not being recognised by the guidelines. Other consumers may identify with that perceived excess, so that they identify as food consumers who are excluded by these dietary prescriptions. Alternatively, consumers may fully identify with the guidelines and take the position that there is no alternative. Furthermore, the guidelines in question could be modern prescriptions (5+ a day, Atkins Diet) or traditional (meat, potatoes, and two veges). All of these possibilities require that consumers not only purchase and eat their food, but that they think and rethink those actions. The consumption does not happen once, but it happens repeatedly in thought. Furthermore, each prior consumption occasion can link to all other occasions in a chain of consumption decisions that are continually reinterpreted. The appeal to a Saussurian chain of signifiers is intentional.

This point can be pushed even further. Taylor (2004) described the development of money from referential to relational. Referential money is a signifier that refers to some signified other than itself. This is true when the unit of money is also a commodity, such as cattle, salt, or even gold. Relational money arises when it becomes nothing other than the measurement of the differences in values of other commodities: 'Value, in other words, no longer is a function or representing an independent referent but is determined by reciprocal relations among entities and forms' (Taylor, 2004, p. 113). For Taylor, this type of money produces insecurity and uncertainty, and leads to economic bubbles like the late-1990s dot.com boom. This difference between referential and relational can be applied to food choices, too. Economists assume that food behaviours are referential – that there is a link between food consumption and biological necessities and sensory experiences. However, in a relational economy, food decisions are based on the differences between options, diets, and behaviours, and their meaning to consumers is determined by a chain of difference between signifiers. Food behaviours could thus become unmoored from biological necessity and lead to greater insecurity.

There are two key differences between the economic and Lacanian frameworks. The first is that in the economic framework, a specific food consumption event has an eternal value determined by the consumer's preferences. There is one single utility value, which will be the same before, during, and after consumption. In the Lacanian framework, consumption is constantly rethought, reinterpreted, and repositioned in the subject's relation to the symbolic order. A food consumption event can take on many different values depending on how it is thought. The second key difference is that the economic framework gives each event a single value, its utility, which sums up all its positive and negative

aspects. Because each food is either eaten or not eaten and because a single price can be found for the food (market price or implied price), the consumption decision can be reduced to a single dimension and then described by a unidimensional utility function. Described from a Lacanian perspective, food consumption is about the relationship between a person and the social order and how food plays into it. The value of a food can thus be multidimensional, allowing anxiety to be assessed separately from satisfaction rather than additively. Food consumption can thus produce *both* satisfaction and anxiety.

Alternatives to the proposed theory

The point of departure for this paper was that mainstream economic theory did not account fully for consumers' food behaviours, especially their anxiety. A Lacanian theory has been proposed to provide an improved framework. Other theories, which the sceptical reader may prefer, have been used to describe food consumption. Several theories are thus briefly presented and critiqued.

Economists have developed several alternative ways to consider consumption. One approach has been to treat discount rates as hyperbolic. These non-linear discount rates result in near-term decisions having high discount rates while long-term ones do not (Laibson, 1997). This approach allows decisions to have different values in the present and in the future, which overcomes the problem of each consumption decision having an eternal value. At each point in time, however, each consumption decision has one value, rather than simultaneously producing satisfaction and anxiety. Another approach has been to consider the impact of identity. A leading economist has proposed that satisfaction derives from a function of price and tastes and identity (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000). This approach would seem to connect to a larger literature on identity and its construction. On closer inspection, however, it does not recognise anything structural about identity, about how it is formed or how it operates for the individual to influence or constrain decisions. Instead, the mathematical formulation used simply posits that identity exists for the consumer and enters into the same utility dimension as preferences.

Other alternative economic theories are based in behavioural economics. One approach, prospect theory, suggests that individuals measure change from a given reference point, such as their current endowment, and that losses are weighted more heavily than gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; List, 2004). While this approach does allow similar changes to have different impacts depending on the situation (the endowment) and over time (because of non-linear weights), it cannot for the simultaneous production of satisfaction and anxiety from consumption decisions. Research on decision heuristics and cognitive biases treats humans' limited ability to process information as a new constraint (Todd & Gigerenzer, 2003). This approach still assumes that preferences are fixed,

although imperfectly applied. A second behavioural approach considers human behaviour as rule-based: people do what has worked for them in the past (Earl, 1983; Todd & Gigerenzer, 2003). This approach creates a problem of infinite regress (Hey, 1982) and cannot explain why consumers might continue with behaviours that produce anxiety. It has also been accused of developing *ad hoc* explanations tailored to suit data (Rabin, 2002). A final example of a behavioural approach is the recent work by economists that modelled obesity as a social phenomenon (Blanchflower, Oswald, & Van Landeghem, 2009). Again, however, the social impact was additive with other elements of utility, so satisfaction and anxiety were not co-produced.

However, these solutions still leave the problem of why people would have such strange preferences that hurt them, that reduce their long-term welfare. They also leave economic psychology open to a mainstream argument founded in social evolutionary theory (neo-Darwinism), that organisms with these preferences would be 'worse off' and therefore would be outcompeted by organisms with preferences that better match their long-term (survival) interests. These economic psychology theories also raise important questions about how to maximise social welfare. The best programmes could be targeted at reducing regret and increasing self-acceptance.

Other disciplines outside economics have theorised food consumption. Social anthropology, for example, can contribute an understanding of the role of culture in organising food consumption (Fischler, 1993), and sociology can describe the impact of the social context in generating food problems (Dixon & Broom, 2007). Thus, social anthropology considers the role of culture in reducing risks associated with trying new foods (Fischler, 1993). While they provide context, they fit poorly with the economic focus on individual decision making, in much the same way that the psychoanalytic subject cannot be made to fit within cultural theory (Donald, 1991). In addition, to the extent that individual behaviour is defined by the social situation, the individual consumer is once again left with no power of decision making, no agency. Social psychological accounts, such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), tend to be unidirectional models without a feedback loop of individual agency onto preference formation (e.g., Cook, Kerr, & Moore, 2002) and do not account for the revaluation of consumption decisions. Psychological accounts emphasise childhood experiences, peer influences, and sociocultural influences, but how preferences are acquired is less studied (Rozin, 2006). Furthermore, individual agency in the choice process, the root of food anxiety (Fischler, 1993), has little role in these models (Rozin, 2006).

Implications of the theory

This Lacanian approach has implications both for theoretical and applied economics. On the theoretical side, the ideas discussed above have three implications. First, they imply that the key unit of analysis is consumers in their social setting. Currently, the unit of analysis is generally the choices that are made. Social, economic, and demographic characteristics may be used to describe consumers and even to create market clusters. However, the focus of this additional information is to support the analysis of choices. Economic research informed by psychoanalysis would focus instead on consumers themselves and their relationship to and interpretation of the social order. For food research, this new focus would require economists to understand what consumers think about the different food prescriptions and diets around them. These prescriptions may include governmental exhortations to eat more fruits and vegetables and drink less alcohol, fad diets such as the Atkins Diet or the blood type diet, programmes for weight management like Weight Watchers, and traditional or cultural notions of what or how they should eat. It would be important to understand how consumers see or position themselves vis-à-vis these prescriptions. It would also be important to investigate how they construct their food desires with respect to themselves and these food prescriptions. This research would provide a context for understanding consumers' food choices.

The second implication of these ideas is that economics should not rely on a single net value for food consumption, like unidimensional utility, but instead needs to understand both the positive and negative reactions that consumers have. Economists should examine food anxiety itself, rather than allowing it to be netted out by the positive utility of food. At the moment, the consumption decision has been collapsed into a single dimension: whether or not the person has purchased an item. By modelling this behaviour as a binary yes-no or probabilistically, economists have been able to view the behaviour in a single dimension. Alternatively, utility could be viewed as a multidimensional relationship between consumers and goods and services. The market transaction occurs based on a specific price, which measures the desire for the good or service at a point in time. The goal of economists should be to understand that desire, which means understanding how consumers think about their future potential satisfaction from their purchases and how they are barred from achieving that satisfaction. Thus, there is not a single utility value to be calculated, but several valuations, expectations, and relationships to be understood.

The third implication of these ideas is that time must be central to the analysis. The current mainstream economic approach assumes fixed and stable preferences and thus fixed and stable valuations. However, a consumption decision happens at a specific time in a specific context, but is considered beforehand and reflected on afterward. This rethinking or repetition creates the potential for many different valuations, and if utility is multidimensional, then each dimension could take

different values over time. Economic research should investigate how consumers anticipate their food consumption, how they experience it, and then how they evaluate it afterward. It then needs to understand how prior consumption is used to inform present and future consumption. It is possible that consumers' valuations are stable over time, but this is a testable proposition that should be investigated.

Concerning public efforts to influence food consumption and to improve health through food consumption, one implication stands out: it is impossible to understand the impact of creating more programmes and prescriptions to encourage people to eat 'correctly' without understanding how consumers relate to these social orders. The rationale of government intervention appears to be that people want to eat food that supports their physical health, that more or better information will help them do that, and that the government is the best provider of that information. A Lacanian approach recognises that consumers' relation to governmental dietary information is dialectical. The government as representative of the social order proposes a dietary prescription, and then the consumer reacts to it. This process creates the meaning given to the prescription and determines the consumer's behaviour towards it. The consumer may follow it to a greater or lesser extent, and may also identify with the prescription to a greater or lesser extent. There is thus a range of possible outcomes for the consumer's physical and mental welfare, depending on process of proclaiming the prescription and engaging with it. It is also not self-evident that the same process will improve both physical health and psychological welfare. Prescriptions could, in fact, improve physical health but increase food anxiety, and economists would be hard-pressed to apply their standard principles to determine whether utility had increased.

Thoughts on a research programme

This paper has been concerned mainly with developing a theoretical idea. A few thoughts can be offered, however, regarding a research programme. The most important aspect of a research programme is that it must study food consumption empirically. It must be able to examine food consumption through this theoretical lens and demonstrate its ability to account for food behaviours. One potential criticism is that psychoanalysis is unscientific, which is often used to mean that it cannot be subjected to Popperian falsification. That critique, itself, must be either unscientific or falsifiable. The argument advanced here is that a Lacanian framework provides a useful explanation of consumer behaviour. It remains to develop specific hypotheses and create a research programme to assess the argument. However, to dismiss the potential for the research before it has been empirically tested and falsified is to act unscientifically.

A second aspect of a research programme to consider is the unit of study. As discussed above, the proposed theory suggests that consumers' relation to the social order of food is key to understanding food behaviour. The research thus needs to study individual consumer intensively enough to understand how they position themselves vis-à-vis food prescriptions and diets, and how they react to those prescriptions and their own food behaviours. This need suggests that a valid research programme would need to establish a panel of consumers to study fairly intensively, using qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative methods would explore the nature of consumption relationships and allow researchers to discover key information that could be used to understand them. The quantitative methods would collect data to use in developing models both to assess the validity of the proposed theory and to compare results to other economic research.

Other necessary aspects of the research programme arise from the discussion of the differences between the proposed theory and mainstream economics. Time is clearly an important dimension, as it is important to understand how consumers relate to food prescriptions and food consumption over time. A longitudinal project with a panel of consumers would be required, including intensive periods understanding specific consumption events and specific food prescriptions. The research would also need to be sensitive to the potential multidimensionality of utility of food consumption. It should gather information on the negative and positive reactions to food consumption, to the satisfaction and anxiety that it produces. In this vein, it must iterate in desire (Copjec, 1994).

One question that arises is how to gather the required data. This is an area where working with clinicians would most improve this research. The issue is how social researchers could gather from individuals information that is meaningful for a Lacanian description of their behaviour. A secondary consideration is how this can be done in such a way as to inform a research project involving potentially hundreds of consumers.

The broad contours of a research programme become clear. There is theoretical work to be done to flesh out these ideas, sharpen the propositions, and develop testable hypotheses. To test the hypotheses requires a panel of consumers, probably numbering in the hundreds in order to produce results acceptable to the economics profession. This panel would participate in the research over a few years, and would respond to qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys repeatedly over that time. The research would focus on the participants' assessments of and reactions to the food prescriptions to which they are exposed, as well as how they position themselves vis-à-vis these prescriptions. It would consider their positive and negative reactions and determine the extent to which these reactions form unitary or multidimensional assessments of food.

Conclusion

Economic theory does not currently account for the full range of food-related behaviours that are observed amongst today's consumers. Observers of food behaviour report that there is an enormous amount of uncertainty and anxiety concerning food, as well as food choices that are demonstrably physically unhealthy. These behaviours do not produce satisfaction, and yet they persist despite a raft of social, commercial, and governmental interventions and lots of economic transactions. This paper has presented an alternative theory derived from Lacanian concepts. The theory suggests that food consumption can result in both satisfaction and anxiety as the result of consumers' dialectical relationship with food prescriptions. It implies that economics has been deaf to consumers' desire, and that government interventions to promote healthy eating have been simplistic.

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