Greetings,

You recently participated in a study about "Healthy Eating," and said that you would be interested in hearing about the results. We appreciate your help with our research, and we are happy to have the opportunity to tell you about the findings.

This write-up tells you about what we were looking for and about what we found. If you would like to ask questions, to comment on what you read, or to find out more, you can contact project staff by phoning (07) 3346 9515, by e-mailing w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au, or by writing to Dr. Winnifred Louis, School of Psychology, McElwain Building / University of Queensland / St. Lucia, QLD 4072. You can also read about other studies that we've done on decision-making at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: HEALTHY EATING QUESTIONNAIRE
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WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR
In this study, we were exploring variables that we thought might be linked to healthy and unhealthy eating habits. We looked at a heap of variables that have been studied in previous research, but we were especially interested in student and gender identities and norms. Norms are socially defined rules for what is acceptable. We wanted to look at whether students who strongly identified as UQ students would be influenced by perceived differences in student and community eating norms, and whether students who strongly identified as women or men were influenced by perceived gender differences. Some research that we conducted a couple of years ago suggested that this would be the case. Moreover, a theoretical model called “referent informational influence theory” (Terry & Hogg, 1996) says that the norms of groups you belong to ('ingroups') are very important in decisions, so if people perceive there is a norm in their own group supporting an action (e.g., bad eating for students), they are likely to act in a similar way. Gender differences in eating habits have often been studied, but focusing in on students’ bad eating is something that is relatively new in the research, we think.

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS
During the time period May 2005, 53 people completed the study. This is fewer than we had intended, but the student who was collecting the data pretty much ran out of time! Ages ranged from 17 to 33, and respondents were mostly women (72%). Most people were English-speaking (91%) and living away from their parents (78%). Minorities were vegetarian (11%) or dieting (15%).

WHAT WE FOUND
1. MEASURES OF BODY SIZE AND EATING. We were interested in five measures of eating habits and size. The body image inventory measured what size people perceived their body to be and what size they wanted to be. Most people saw themselves as on the thin side of the scale, but wanted to be even thinner. We also measured people’s expectations of consuming healthy and unhealthy food over the next two weeks. People expected to eat healthy food much more often, but on average people expected to eat unhealthy food every day. People also indicated what comfort foods they had. On average, people had no healthy comfort foods, but at least one unhealthy one. Finally, we asked people to report their weight and height, which allowed us to calculate their body mass index. The average BMI was 22, which is in the normal range, on the thin side. So on the whole it was a healthy group of students that were accessed, despite some indication of unhealthy eating habits.
2. MEASURES OF SELF-ESTEEM, STRESS, AND VIEWS ON EATING. As well as looking at identity and norms, we were interested in some other variables that research shows are linked to healthy eating. We measured self-esteem and found students felt good about themselves, on average. Consistent with past research we found people with higher self-esteem expected to eat fewer unhealthy foods and had fewer comfort foods (i.e., they were eating better). High self-esteem people were also less likely to see their body as heavier than they wanted it to be, even though self-esteem was not linked to actual differences in body mass index. People who reported more life stress expected to eat more unhealthy food, though no differences appeared on the other variables. We also looked at people’s views on healthy eating. We found people with high self-esteem viewed healthy eating more favourably, and felt more in control of their diet. Positive attitudes and control were both associated with eating fewer unhealthy foods, and high control perceptions were associated with having fewer comfort foods. Views on eating didn’t seem to be linked to body mass index, however.

3. MEASURES OF IDENTITY AND NORMS. We then looked at how committed people felt to their student and gender identities, and how they perceived eating habits in these groups. Most people felt mildly positive about being a UQ student, but also perceived that UQ students ate unhealthily, on average. We found a trend that people who saw being a student as more important to themselves ate more unhealthily (especially in first year). These are the results we were looking for, but the data were pretty weak and not statistically significant. In terms of gender identity, most people felt pretty positive about their gender, but both men and women perceived women ate more healthily than men. Again, there were trends suggesting this impacted on eating patterns, but nothing very strong. In both cases, there wasn’t any link between identity and norm perceptions and body mass index.

WHAT NOW?

Overall the study showed positive effects of self-esteem on healthy eating, and negative effects of life stress. In addition, there was some evidence that if people identified with a group (UQ students, women, or men) that was perceived to eat badly, this put them at risk of unhealthy eating. But because some of the effects were there but seemed weak and sometimes inconsistent, what we’re thinking of doing is trying to collect data from a lot more people so we have a larger sample and will be able to detect effects more reliably and powerfully. Partly we’re interested in the relationship between student identity and eating as an example of working referent group norms (the theoretical model), but it’s also interesting because it’s an area for intervention to promote healthier student eating habits. Challenging the idea that it’s normal and ok for students to eat fatty foods, drink sugary drinks and alcohol, and avoid vegetables could promote better health for students in the long term.

THANKS AGAIN....

So that’s a description of what we found in this study. If you have any questions, or would like a copy of the longer write-up when we get that done (in several months) please get in touch. And thank you again for your participation and interest!