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An examination of the psychometric construct of 'food addiction' and its relationship with trait binge eating, addictive personality and psychological wellbeing

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Some individuals ascribe others' intake of one or more frequently consumed foods as an 'addiction'. Whilst the concept of 'Food Addiction' (FA) is often used metaphorically to reflect loss of control over intake of certain foods, recently researchers have framed overconsumption and obesity relative to clinically-defined substance-use and addictive disorders. The present study used the Yale Food Addiction Scale (YFAS) to examine the strength of its associations with problematic eating, addictive behaviours and psychological wellbeing; and after controlling for the existing trait binge eating construct. Of participants completing the full online questionnaire (N=710), 8.5% (N=60) met the YFAS 'diagnosis' for FA. YFAS 'diagnosis' and 'symptom count' correlated significantly with scores on five eating behaviour questionnaires. However, correlations between the YFAS and measures of substance abuse and addictive personality traits were inconsistent, signifying that the YFAS may not reflect an addiction-based trait, but simply loss of control over food intake. Regression analyses revealed that the addition of YFAS to Binge Eating Scale (BES) scores accounted for minimal additional variance in other measures, demonstrating that associations between the YFAS and measures of problematic eating, addictive behaviours and psychological impairment can be adequately explained by the BES alone. To conclude, whilst the YFAS may identify a small proportion of the population reporting uncontrolled overconsumption of palatable foods, these individuals do not appear to demonstrate an addictive disposition or behavioural differences compared to those identified by the BES.

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