

## Eating Animals: The Influence of Food-based Narratives

Gillian Spolarich

Amanda Ruth-McSwain  
*College of Charleston*

Lisa K. Lundy  
*university of florida*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/jac>



Part of the [Animal Studies Commons](#), [Mass Communication Commons](#), and the [Social Influence and Political Communication Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#).

### Recommended Citation

Spolarich, Gillian; Ruth-McSwain, Amanda; and Lundy, Lisa K. (2018) "Eating Animals: The Influence of Food-based Narratives," *Journal of Applied Communications*: Vol. 102: Iss. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1772>

This Research is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Applied Communications* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

---

## Eating Animals: The Influence of Food-based Narratives

### Abstract

This study examines the prevalence and persuasiveness of popular food-based narratives. Specifically, the book *Eating Animals*, a detailed critique of the U.S. meat industry, provided the foundation for exploring the influence of food-based narratives. Guided by the theory of narrative persuasion, a qualitative research design was employed to investigate the influence of this contemporary text on reader perceptions and behaviors. The present study incorporated in-depth interviews with individuals that read all or some of the acclaimed food-based narrative *Eating Animals*. Findings indicate that the popular narrative motivated a range of attitudinal and behavioral changes. Additional themes that emerged relate to cognitive dissonance, conscious consumerism and interpersonal influence over food consumption decisions. Implications of these findings are discussed relevant to both communication practice and future research.

### Keywords

Eating Animals, food narratives, narrative persuasion, cognitive dissonance, conscious consumerism

### Cover Page Footnote/Acknowledgements

This manuscript was based on research presented at the 2017 Association for Communication Excellence (ACE) annual conference in New Orleans, LA.

## Eating Animals: The Influence of Food-based Narratives

Food is an integral part of every person's life. It is a necessity for survival, but its importance extends beyond nourishment as it also harbors immense cultural and personal meaning. Cramer et al. (2011) argue that food is a type of communication in that "it is a nonverbal means by which we share meaning with others" (p. x). Food is also linked with rituals and culture. For example, much of our lives are surrounded by food-based events, such as Thanksgiving and other holiday meals.

In the past few decades, "food-focused" consumption has increased (Cramer et al., 2011). Whether it is buying organic or trying the new recipe from The Rachael Ray Show, people's awareness of and interest in food is heightened. Although Americans continue to learn about food-based behavior through tradition and family, there is an increasing influence of the mass media and popular culture. Even the government, particularly with Michelle Obama's Let's Move! campaign, has advocated for more exercise and healthy food consumption among American families (Let's Move!, 2015).

One way people receive messages about food is through documentaries. Although less prevalent than food programming on television, like Food Network, documentaries are a common outlet to showcase social and ethical food-related issues and have been gaining popularity over the past two decades (Corbett, 2013). Food documentaries are not the only form of media that attempt to create public awareness about the issues and ethics surrounding the American food industry. Contemporary books related to the food industry that have received significant attention include *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006) by Michael Pollan, *Fast Food Nation* (2001) by Eric Schlosser, and *Eating Animals* (2009) by Jonathan Safran Foer.

The most recent of these popular books, *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer, is a detailed story documenting the author's personal investigation into the American meat industry. Foer's own journey began when he was a young boy and his babysitter asked him, "You know that chicken is chicken, right?" (Foer, 2009, p. 6). For much of his life, Foer wavered back and forth between omnivore and vegetarian. However, it was not until Foer had a son that his curiosity on the rigid dichotomy peaked. He wanted to make informed decisions about what he was feeding his son.

Through his documented journey, he unveiled practices of factory farming. Some of the farming practices covered in his book include the maltreatment and suffering of the factory-farmed animals, the dangers of factory farms including health-related risks, and the negative impact that factory farming has on the environment. Another perspective that Foer shares in his book is the education surrounding the farmers that run ethical and humane farms and slaughterhouses, like Paradise Locker Meats and Niman Ranch. He also highlights popular myths and stories that the American public use to justify their eating habits, many of which he struggled with himself.

Foer suggests throughout his book that most individuals are not ignorant to factory farming, but rather indifferent to its reality. Regardless, Foer attempts to expose his readers to the ins and outs of factory farming with startling facts and anecdotes. Ginsberg, who reviewed the book for *Shelf Awareness*, concluded, "What distinguishes Foer's book is the attention he pays to narrative; that is, the stories we build around the food we eat and the culture and tradition built through these stories," (Ginsberg, 2009, para. 37). The book centers on Foer's personal research as well as various commentaries from people for and against factory farming.

Although reviews of *Eating Animals* are variable, critics have acknowledged the power in Foer's words and stories, with some even believing they are powerful enough on their own to convert people to vegetarianism (Anderson, 2009). At the very least, critics agree that the book will most definitely challenge readers to think about their food choices (McDonald, 2010). Given the attention that *Eating Animals* has received as well as the suggested power of similar food

narratives, the present study will focus on the influence of *Eating Animals* to better understand reader perceptions and behaviors surrounding the U.S. food system.

### Theoretical Framework

Countless narratives, both fiction and non-fiction, have influenced readers' lives. According to Bilandzic and Kinnebrock (2009), "A vast number of studies demonstrate that stories are powerful in altering the audience's knowledge about the real world and facilitate changes in attitudes" (p. 355). Prior studies have examined viewer reactions to agricultural documentaries. Meyers et al (2011) found that viewers of *Food, Inc.* and *King Corn* felt the narratives were one-sided and did not accurately portray modern agricultural practices. Holt and Cartmell (2013) also studied the impact of *Food, Inc.* on viewer perceptions. After viewing the film, participants had more confidence in the safety of organic food than traditionally produced food. They also rated farmers' concern for animal welfare lower than they did prior to viewing the film.

The power of narratives can be partly attributed to the concept of narrative persuasion and, more specifically, narrative transportation. Narrative persuasion "refers to attitudes and intentions developed from processing narrative messages that are not overtly persuasive, such as novels, movies, or video games" (Van Laer et al., 2013, p. 800). Furthermore, narrative transportation happens when "consumers mentally enter a world that the story evokes" (p. 797). During this process, the reader becomes so connected to the narrative that they could experience attitude and behavioral change after reading it (Green, 2006, Van Laer et al., 2013). Both Van Laer et al. (2013) and Green (2006) cite mental imagery as a key part of narrative transportation. Mental imagery includes "images that are likely to be enduring and are difficult to change with other types of arguments" (Green, 2006, p. S170).

*Eating Animals* is a particularly interesting book because, although it provides many facts about the factory farming industry, it also incorporates many of Foer's own narrative stories as well as the narratives shared by his interviewees. The book is rich with description, often sharing Foer's emotional journey through vivid imagery. This type of mental imagery is abundant throughout the book and could, therefore, have the potential to transport readers to a world much different than their lived reality. Further, although existing literature suggests that transportation may refer to both cognitive and emotional immersion in a story, some scholars suggest that personal change is more likely to occur through emotional transportation (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). In this book, Foer may instigate an emotional experience by chronicling this personal journey about a fairly polarizing issue (factory farming).

Both Van Laer et al. (2013) and Green (2006) argue that not every reader is impacted by a narrative in the same ways, meaning narrative transportation occurs at varying rates. Those who are more transported by the narrative are more likely to be affected and, ultimately, more likely to change their beliefs and behaviors (Green, 2006). Van Laer et al. (2013) added that "with personally relevant stories, story receivers may be more inclined to evaluate the story carefully and to generate critical thoughts related to the story" (p. 808). With that being said, attitude and behavior change is not likely to occur across the board with those who have read *Eating Animals*. In fact, narrative transportation suggests that individuals more personally invested in the book's messages may be more likely to be transported and, therefore, more likely to change.

Similar to the present study and through the lens of narrative persuasion, Hormes et al. (2013) examined students' attitude changes after reading *The Omnivore's Dilemma* by Michael Pollan for a university reading project. Specifically, the researchers "examined changes in attitudes related to food production and consumption" (Hormes et al., 2013, p. 2). As a quantitative investigation, some of the survey topics included organic foods, meat, local produce, the quality of the American food supply, and opposition to government subsidies. The researchers found that many of the

students' beliefs were significantly impacted after reading the book. However, most of the attitude change was not long-term and lessened greatly after one year. The only topics that remained elevated with readers after 12 months were “self-reported opposition to government subsidies and belief that the quality of the food supply is declining” (p. 2). The researchers ultimately attributed this decline to fading cognitive and emotional memories associated with reading the book, as well as the competition from strong pre-existing habits.

### Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to explore readers' opinions, attitudes, and behaviors after reading *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer. Based on the popularity of food narratives, like *Eating Animals*, and the theoretical support from the aforementioned literature, the following research question guided the study: How do popular food communication narratives/texts, specifically *Eating Animals*, influence food-based decisions?

### Research Methods

Guided by the theory of narrative persuasion, we employed a qualitative research design to examine the influence of this popular text on reader perceptions and behaviors. We conducted qualitative in-depth interviews to gain insight into each participant's opinions about the book and their behavioral responses after reading the book. By conducting qualitative research, we were able to examine the content of each response. More specifically, interviews provided thick descriptions about the readers' experience of reading *Eating Animals* and the perceptions formed about the factory farming industry following their read. In-depth interviews were believed to be the best method of data collection for several reasons. First, “interviews are particularly well suited to understand the social actor's experience and perspective” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 173). Usually, interview participants are selected because their experiences are applicable to the research problem. Accordingly, we recruited participants because they had read all or part of *Eating Animals*. Second, interviews allow social actors to “produce explanations of their behavior” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 174). The interviews allowed for an in-depth explanation of each participant's readership experience and related food-based behaviors. Finally, interviews allowed participants to share insight into the power of narrative persuasion in this particular context.

For this study, we used a purposive sampling technique, snowball sampling, to recruit participants. We used several different means to identify and recruit initial interview participants. Given that *Eating Animals* was a college-wide reading selection during the 2013-2014 academic year at a southeastern university, sampling procedures focused on recruiting students from this university. We sent emails to approximately 16 courses, mostly 300-level courses, in an attempt to find juniors who had read all or some of *Eating Animals* in 2012 as incoming freshmen. We emailed and visited courses to announce the study as well as provide information and a link to sign up for an interview.

We also attempted to recruit via social media. We posted to several different groups on Facebook including the university's Class of 2015 and 2016 pages. The study was also publicized to all of the university's majors and minors on the University's Honors College blog and the weekly email memo from their home department.

Following expert review and approval of a researcher-developed question guide that included questions and probes relevant to the research question, we conducted in-depth interviews with 16 participants, each having read all or some of the *Eating Animals* narrative. Prior to the interview, all participants were required to fill out an online demographic survey to collect age, gender, socioeconomic status, relationship status, how much of *Eating Animals* they had read, and when

they read it. Once participants completed the survey, we scheduled an interview with the participant. All interviews took place at various locations central to the university's campus.

Interviews lasted 25 to 45 minutes in length and employed a semi-structured question guide. We audio recorded the interviews and took field notes were taken in order to capture each interview in its entirety. After the informed consent document was explained to participants, they provided their signature as the indication of their consent to participate as well as a preferred pseudonym to be used for reporting results. Interview questions gathered data on participant opinions on *Eating Animals*, food consumption behaviors, dispositions towards other food-based narratives such as documentaries, and any cognitive or behavioral change that may have occurred after reading *Eating Animals*. Following each interview discussion, we asked participants to share the names of peers/friends that had also read some or all of *Eating Animals*. We used this chain referral technique to identify additional participants. We compensated interview participants with a \$10 Starbucks gift card.

To analyze the data, we employed traditional qualitative research techniques from both an inductive process and grounded theory lens (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). More specifically, once we transcribed all data verbatim, we used a constant comparative approach to code the data. We read the data several times to find instances that both related and contrasted each other through open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Next, we created categories or "concepts, constructs, themes, and other types of "bins" in which to put items that are similar" through a process similar to axial coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 214). We asked all participants the same questions so that the responses to each question could be compared and contrasted. We compared and categorized the data, and created codes to label and organize the data. Then through selective coding, we interpreted the data, focusing on searching for exemplars, which range from a brief excerpt to a longer story that has been crafted from several sources" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 234). Finally, we interpreted the data to create themes that represent the data.

Throughout the data collection and analysis processes, trustworthiness of the research was ensured through a combination of an audit trail that included transcripts, field notes, and multiple working manuscript drafts, reflexive journaling and discussion to record thoughts and feelings in an effort to bracket subjectivity, rich participant quotes to provide evidence of research themes, and member checks with select participants to request feedback and corroborate research conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Results

Of the 16 participants, nine were female and seven were male, ranging from ages 19 to 24. All 16 participants have read some or all of *Eating Animals* within the last five years. Most of the participants, 13 in total, read the book as incoming freshmen for the university's summer reading program while the remaining three participants read the book as a personal reading selection. All participants had read the book within four years of the interview period.

After using a grounded theory approach to analyze the data, we identified five themes:

1. Power and pervasiveness of food-based narratives
2. Cognitive dissonance and food behaviors
3. Instances of "conscious consumerism"
4. Skepticism of food narratives
5. Influence of family and culture

### Power and Pervasiveness of Food-based Narratives

Although participants were primarily asked about their interaction with the *Eating Animals* narrative, several participants alluded to other food-based narratives throughout the interview

conversations. Participants shared that they found many of these narratives, including *Eating Animals*, to be persuasive, and in some cases, they were even referenced as being powerful enough to influence behavior change. The food-based narratives that were most prevalent in the interview discussions were *Eating Animals*; *Supersize Me*; *Food, Inc.*; and *Fast Food Nation*.

Most of the participants mentioned seeing the popular documentary *Supersize Me* and attested to its effectiveness in deterring people from eating fast food. One participant said that after watching *Supersize Me*, she “never wanted to touch any fast food.” Another participant said that it was “eye-opening.” Finally, another participant described that she found the documentary compelling because it was a “case study” approach to the narrative. She said, “it’s a person, it’s not like an animal, it’s a person. It shows you in real time what that food is doing to you. And like it’s not real food so I think that’s interesting.”

*Food, Inc.* was another documentary that many of the participants had watched because of its availability on Netflix. One participant said the film, “...puts you in your place or makes you realize what you’re consuming and makes you realize how bad it [fast food] really is for you.” Another participant cited the film as “quite compelling; something that made me question just about everything I put in my mouth.”

*Fast Food Nation*, a book and subsequent documentary, was often cited during the interviews. One participant credited this book to making a lifestyle change at a young age. She said, “I read *Fast Food Nation* [in middle school] and I became a vegetarian. It was a great book but it was horrifying. I haven’t eaten meat since I was 11.”

Although almost every participant had seen or read at least two food-based narratives, overall, there were not many lifestyle changes attributed to the aforementioned food-based narratives. As such, the influence of the *Eating Animals* seems to best be explained through a spectrum or continuum of reader reactions. It was clear from the analysis that only one participant was not affected by reading the book. Others often said it made them think or was “eye-opening.” Still others reported short-term behavioral change where they stopped consuming certain types of meat, and others became complete vegetarians after reading the book. The following is an example of a participant who seemed to not be as affected after reading the book:

No, I mean I definitely was a little more conscious. I would think about things but I definitely didn’t stop eating meat. I mean I was probably eating while I was reading a book. It didn’t really affect me.

This participant referenced multiple times during her interview that the book “opened her horizons” and that she liked to be informed, but she also made a point that she did not let the book skew her own views. Similarly, many participants claimed that the book made them more “conscious” or made them think more about what they were buying at the grocery store. Many of these participants believe that the consciousness and information learned from the book have stuck with them and has simply made them a more informed consumer.

...like I enjoyed reading it. It didn’t make me reconsider enough to make a change, but it definitely made me think about things in a way I hadn’t before so I can say that much about the experience.

I mean, I would say that I definitely think about, well consider, where my food comes from more than I ever did before. Especially eating things like red meat and chicken sometimes grosses me out if I think about it too much.

There were two participants who, after reading the book, attempted lifestyle changes: one that tried pescetarianism and another who tried vegetarianism. Although the book influenced these changes in behavior, the changes were only short-term.

I remember after I read the book, I had this two-month vegetarian kick. There are really long periods I’ve done it before but I just never said I was a vegetarian

because I feel like if say it, I have to follow through and then I'm gonna feel bad if I don't follow through.

There were two participants who said they became vegetarians after reading the book and reported abstaining from the consumption of meat for a significant amount of time.

I read it over two weeks, and I literally became a vegetarian in a matter of two weeks I guess. Pretty crazy...I really enjoy how he wrote...I guess it made me feel part of a movement more than I've ever felt before, like a group of people.

...keeping kosher, I was already mindful of what I was eating, so then it was easier for me to cut back on like meat, not totally, but to like once a day instead. By the time I finished it, I kind of looked at myself and said you know I would like to be a vegetarian and it's a super easy transition from kosher...so it was pretty gradual while reading, and once I finished [reading] it was immediate. I just cut off all meat and just like spent that year as a vegetarian.

Additionally, there were two participants who already had committed pescetarian and vegetarian lifestyles before reading *Eating Animals*. Both women changed their food-based diets when they were children; one after reading *Fast Food Nation* in a middle school class and the other during a pivotal moment in which she reflected on making the connection that meat was in fact animals one night at the dinner table. Interestingly, these participants had different reactions and influences after reading the book. One believed that *Eating Animals* reinforced her food consumption behavior and also contributed to cutting out fish from her diet. She said, "It definitely did reinforce it. Now I know that I would never go back to eating meat after reading *Eating Animals*. Before I was like maybe I'll go back when I'm older but now I'm like I'll never go back." She attributed Foer's explanation of dairy farms and the fishing industry as influencing her to reassess her consumption habits. She said, "before I was fine just being a vegetarian and then I realized what dairy farms are like..." Another participant reported that reading the book encouraged her to be more flexible in her diet.

It definitely did influence me. But it actually influenced me to be more flexible with my diet. When I read I was very strictly a vegetarian and it influenced me to realize the reasons that I was vegetarian weren't really good reasons. I was just vegetarian because meat kind of grossed me out and I hadn't eaten it for a really long time, and I should be more flexible and open towards different family gatherings and special occasions.

### **Cognitive Dissonance and Food Behaviors**

Cognitive dissonance suggests that people try to avoid information that is contradictory to their own beliefs (Frey, 1986). As one might assume, the increased controversy surrounding the U.S. food system has resulted in feelings of dissonance for many individuals when it comes to their own food-based behaviors. In fact, throughout the interviews, there were several instances in which participants gave excuses or justifications for their own food-based behaviors that run contradictory to the messages in *Eating Animals*, making it quite likely for cognitive dissonance to occur.

An example of cognitive dissonance was apparent when one participant explained why she could never keep up with a vegetarian lifestyle. She was bothered with the information about the chicken industry given in the *Eating Animals* book and, after reading the book, she attempted to stop buying chicken from the grocery store. She explained that she did it for a little while until the behavior proved to conflict with personal convenience.

Well, kind of the second time was when I stopped buying chicken at the grocery store for a little until I realized I needed food to eat...my stepmom is a pescetarian



so they didn't believe I could do it because I do eat a lot of meat. So I became a pescetarian after the first time I read it and it lasted a lot longer than I thought. But once again, I eat meat, so I just couldn't keep up with it.

She followed by providing several different justifications as to why she could not be a vegetarian/pescetarian; she continued to reaffirm her own food-based behaviors by dismissing information she learned from reading the book. Similarly, another participant shared:

Just because I eat meat or non-organic products does not mean that I am an unhealthy or unethical person. I just think the book takes some of its claims a bit too far so I did not read it all.

There was another instance by a participant who was also disturbed by several of the chicken passages in the book, so much so that she could not finish the book. She said, "I didn't finish it partly because I couldn't stomach it." She also justified her own contradictory behavior by saying, "everyone has that one thing they do that's bad and maybe eating chicken is mine and that's the way it is." This is an instance of cognitive dissonance because she is reinforcing her pre-existing behavior by diminishing opposing behaviors.

### **Instances of "Conscientious Consumerism"**

An additional theme that emerged from the data was the notion of conscious consumerism. While interviewing the participants, it was clear that most of the participants consider themselves "conscious consumers," or people who think about what they are purchasing. Keywords that were mentioned the most to describe their own behaviors were "organic," "local," "conscious," and "healthy." Several participants stressed that they try to buy mostly organic and local, often as a way to limit their consumption of industrially produced food, including meat and fast food. Below are excerpts from three different participants regarding their dietary habits.

I'm very conscious...and I try to shop organic and local. I've been making a more conscious effort to buy things that I feel like would enrich the community or things that are local over things that aren't.

I'm a public health major so I tend to be a little more health conscious. I bought all my produce at the farmer's market as opposed to going to the grocery store. I usually do go for healthier options though as opposed to fast food.

I try to buy local products, especially my fruits and vegetables. I just feel like there are so many benefits to buying local - supporting local - organic farmers is just one reason I go to places like the farmer's market.

Many of the words mentioned above were referenced by other participants as well. There was, however, a lot of skepticism toward organic produce associated with those references. Some participants shared this skepticism as an excuse as to why they do not buy organic produce. Specifically, one participant shared:

Local is important to me, organic I'm skeptical of. I see a lot of those labels like it's gluten free, and they just put it on there to make you buy it but it doesn't necessarily mean anything. USDA certifies, their certifications are there but they're not like good rules, so local is better for me.

Overall, it seemed as though most of the participants were "conscious" when it came to making their own food-based decisions. They were aware of other options that differed from traditional food practices and were vocal that this newfound level of consciousness was a significant factor in making their own food-based decisions.

## Skepticism of Food Narratives

Although many participants were influenced by *Eating Animals*, there was also critique and skepticism raised about certain aspects of the book as well as other food-based documentaries. This theme illustrates overwhelming negative opinions that the participants had about food-based documentaries and/or *Eating Animals*. A common critique that came up during the interviews was that food-based documentaries like “Food, Inc.” are often dramatized and one-sided. The following are separate opinions that exemplify this theme.

In the same time, they simplify the problem a huge amount to fit it in an hour and a half, which I’m fine with but at the same time I don’t like anything that’s got like a really obvious message, or overbearing agenda...

Like I do enjoy them but just like anything that comes from this kind of genre of activism, I watch it with a grain of salt. Because I do know that the people that are producing these things are very much pushing an agenda, that’s why they’re making the movie and they’re giving you a very one-sided version of whatever it is. So, while I do give it the benefit of the doubt and believe in it I also think that I can’t base my life decisions on this movie because I’m only getting one side—and a very extreme version of that side. So they always fire me up a little bit but then, in the end, I have to remember that that’s what it’s supposed to do. So I kind of walk away with no impact.

There were others who thought that books were more persuasive than documentaries. Interestingly, although most of the participants thought that the documentaries were “educational” and “eye-opening,” some participants also thought they were made from a biased perspective and sometimes skewed in their claims.

Additionally, when it came to *Eating Animals*, there were several critiques about Foer’s goal of the book. Foer mentioned in the book that his goal is not to make everyone who reads it a vegetarian; however, similar to professional critics of his book, some of the participants found this aim confusing and contradictory. One participant suggested:

Obviously, there is a really strong case against supporting this type of farming...but don’t worry you, can do what you want, but just so you know this is what I’m going to do with my son. It just kind of seemed passive aggressive; like if you’re going to spend the time to write a 300-page book, at least be manly enough to say that this is what you should do, without like defaulting to your son to play on my emotions. It actually left me feeling kind of frustrated. Like take a stand man, like if you’re gonna do all this, take a stand.

Although some participants critiqued *Eating Animals*, there seemed to be more critique of the food-based documentaries in general, like the critiques above, than there was for *Eating Animals*.

## Influence of Family and Culture

Although not directly related to the research question, it is important to note that participants commonly referenced the influence of family, culture, and/or relationships on their food-based behaviors. Most of the references made were toward the participants’ parents although broader cultural implications were certainly present in the data.

In one instance, a male participant references the pressure of a new friend group in influencing his decisions about food.

They thought it was stupid and they were making chicken-bacon quesadillas and they were like, ‘hey do you want one?’ and I was like ‘no I’m a vegetarian’ and they were like that’s ‘stupid dude what are you doing?’

After being persuaded by his friends, the participant eventually gave into the peer pressure and “cracked...and the snowball was rolling.”

Several other participants suggested that their food-based behaviors mirrored those of their parents. Many of the participants indicated that being healthy was important in their household while they were growing up. One participant said:

I was raised really healthy, we always had really balanced meals in my family and I ate healthy food for the most part. My parents also don't really see the value in paying way more for all organic... so I think it definitely influenced that aspect that [eating organic].

In this instance, the participant is attributing her healthy eating habits to her parents but also her beliefs in organic products; both ultimately affecting her present food-based behaviors.

Further exemplifying the influence of culture and community, one participant was from a small town in North Carolina where factory farming is one of the largest economic drivers of the region. Many of her friends' dads are farmers and her father is a surgeon who helps many of the workers who are injured on the farms. The following is an excerpt explaining her dad's visit to a factory farm, which reveals the indirect influence of that visit on her food-based beliefs:

...he came home and we asked him about it and I'm not sure if there were things he could mention or not mention, but overall, he said it wasn't alarming. And that could just be my dad the surgeon, he's seen gross things, he knows. So that's the reason I don't take it for exactly what it is if that makes sense.

Overall, almost every participant cited the influence of someone in their family or circle of friends as impacting their eating habits. Parents were often a part of “pivotal moments” of food-based decisions that each participant shared. Overwhelmingly, friends and family seem to have a heavy influence on the participants' beliefs and behaviors, especially in regard to food consumption, with the mention of food-based media as a far second to these interpersonal relationships.

## Discussion

This study aimed to examine the influence of food narratives, specifically the book *Eating Animals*, on food-based decisions following exposure to the narratives. Implications of the findings as well as limitations and recommendations for future practice and research are discussed below.

Five themes emerged from the data, suggesting several implications about the persuasiveness and influence of *Eating Animals* and other food-based narratives. Cognitive dissonance appears to best explain the reactions to *Eating Animals* for many readers. In fact, many of the participants who showed instances of cognitive dissonance attempted to justify their own food-based behaviors throughout the interview conversations, which ultimately conflicted with the messages presented in the book. According to Nolan and Nail (2014), those that experience dissonance can use three techniques to reduce the tension experienced from dissonance: “changing beliefs, changing actions, or changing perception of the action,” (p. 214). Because changing food-based behaviors, like switching to vegetarianism, is not an easy task, these justifications seem to be a way to ease the possible discomfort or tension experienced from the conflicting information presented in the book about the factory farming industry.

In addition to cognitive dissonance, the persuasive power of the *Eating Animals* narrative may have been limited because of the significant influence that culture and community have on food-based behaviors. Overall, friends and family appeared to be the most significant influences on food-based behaviors, even over prevalent narratives. Even those that were more influenced by the book, like those who switched to vegetarianism, still credited their families and cultural influences as having an impact on their food-based behaviors. This makes sense as family behaviors have

been instilled and reinforced throughout their entire lives (for the participants in the present study, approximately 20 years). Social norms are deeply engrained, making it difficult for competing messages to influence behavior change. Further, it is likely that family traditions and cultural norms reinforced cognitive dissonance among the participants, especially those whose families' beliefs and behaviors did not align with the book's messages.

Although to varying degrees, as referenced above, many of the participants were influenced in some way by *Eating Animals*. A noteworthy finding of the present study is that most of the participants did not experience significant behavioral change after reading the book; However, almost all of the participants experienced a cognitive change, which participants often referred to as the book "making them think" or "opening their eyes." Often participants implied the book motivated a consciousness about what they consumed and a salience on the factory farming issue.

In terms of narrative persuasion and narrative transportation, many participants pointed out that Foer's descriptions, particularly of the chicken factory he snuck into, were poignant and influential. This may be because Foer gave detailed descriptions of the farm's conditions, which incited mental imagery in some of the participants. Green (2006) cited mental imagery as a key for a reader to being transported in a narrative and described mental imagery as "enduring and difficult to change," (p. S170). Moreover, Foer provided personal stories about his dog, grandmother, and Jewish identity. Some participants cited this as memorable and relatable. This speaks to the power of narrative persuasion because those that find the story more personally relevant is likely to be transported and change their attitudes (Van Laer et al., 2013).

Additionally, the study produced similar results to the study conducted by Hormes et al. (2013) about *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. The Hormes et al (2013) study found that many participants did experience attitude change after reading the book, but much of the change dissipated after a year. Hormes et al (2013) ultimately attributed this decline to fading cognitive and emotional memories associated with reading the book, as well as the competition from strong pre-existing habits. Similarly, in this study, we found that much of the attitude and behavior change was not long lasting after reading *Eating Animals*.

Seven of the 16 participants also referred to themselves as "conscious" when describing their consumption habits. This conscious consumerism could also be participants' way of negotiating the messages presented in the book. Often citing healthy lifestyles as a priority, many participants indicated that they often shopped for organic and local products and consumed produce in an attempt to avoid artificially made foods. It is possible that this transition to a conscious consumer is the easiest and most accessible way of dealing with the messages received in a food-based narrative like *Eating Animals* and *Food, Inc.* In other words, rather than give up meat entirely, participants found alternative ways to address the information learned about the food industry by making small changes and focusing on local and organic food.

It was evident that another factor present in the persuasive power of the *Eating Animals* narrative was skepticism of the information shared and the way the narrative was constructed. There appeared to be resistance to blindly accept the assertions presented in *Eating Animals*, which was cited as disturbing and even difficult to read at times. This could have been a response to the extreme views on both sides of this debate. For example, almost every participant shared negative opinions about food-based documentaries, often suggesting that they were too disturbing and one-sided views of reality. Some participants even shared the belief that documentaries show extremes simply for shock value and sensationalism. Again, this belief could be a reason why a behavioral change was not common after exposure to food-based narratives.

Although the qualitative nature of the present study is not viewed as a limitation, it does limit the generalizability of the findings. The themes uncovered through data analysis are certainly transferable to similar contexts and provide a foundation for further inquiry; however, the results only describe the experience of the participants interviewed.

In addition, many of the study's limitations occurred during the recruitment of interview participants. It was much more difficult to recruit students who had read some or all of the book than expected. In 2012, every freshman at this southeastern liberal arts college, over 2,000 people, received a free copy of *Eating Animals* and was strongly encouraged to read the book. The book was discussed in most freshman English classes, and Jonathan Safran Foer came to the campus to speak about the book. However, it was still difficult to recruit participants not even three to four years later. Almost all of the recruitment was aimed at juniors and seniors who would have read the book when they were freshmen. It was not until we were able to secure incentives that we successfully secured participants.

Finally, as with many other qualitative studies, this study was subject to researcher bias. However, we were aware of this potential influence and bias and accounted for it by being reflexive while conducting the interviews and interpreting the data through journaling and research team discussions.

Often food-based narratives, including documentaries, are made by activists who are hoping to make audiences aware of specific issues within and around the American food industry. This research could prove useful to activist organizations as it provides insight into the persuasive power of narratives. Based on the findings of the present study, there are specific recommendations for professional practice. Careful consideration should be given to the perceived credibility of documentary films before using a documentary approach for persuasive aims. Care should be given to the development of persuasive messages to recognize or account for ego-involvement. Narratives developed/used to invoke behavior change should employ vivid descriptions to help motivate mental imagery. Communicators should take advantage of the power of cultural and familial influence on food-based decisions and behaviors.

Further research about the influence of *Eating Animals* and other food-based narratives could be enlightening and build on the conclusions drawn from this study. In the future, a similar study could be conducted in combination with a quantitative survey for more robust insights. A survey could reach more participants and provide numerical data to measure and/or test relevant theories. A mixed methods approach could not only provide interesting breadth on this topic, but focus groups or interviews would provide the depth to support or explain the numerical findings.

Anderson, S. (2009). Hungry? The latest in a bumper crop of books about the ethics of eating animals. *New York Magazine*, 76–78. Retrieved from

<http://nymag.com/arts/books/reviews/61735/>

Bal, P. M., & Veltkamp, M. (2013). How does fiction reading influence empathy? An experimental investigation on the role of emotional transportation. *PLoS ONE*, 8(1), e55341.

[doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0055341](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0055341)

Bilandzic, H., & Kinnebrock, S. (2009). Narrative experiences and effect of media stories: An introduction to the special issue. *Communications*, 34, 355–360.

[doi.org/10.1515/COMM.2009.022](https://doi.org/10.1515/COMM.2009.022)

Corbett, K. (2013). “Gleaners” and “Waste”: The post-issue/advocacy documentary, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 41(3), 128–135. [doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2012.755487](https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2012.755487)

Cramer, J. M., Greene, C. P., & Walters, L. M. (Eds.). (2011). *Food as communication, communication as food*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Portman, N. (Producer), & Quinn, C. (Director). (2014). *Eating Animals* [Documentary]. United States: Farm Forward. Retrieved from <https://farmforward.com/2014/12/29/eating-animals-documentary/>

[documentary/](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60212-9)

Frey, D. (1986). Recent research on selective exposure to information. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 19, 41–78. [doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60212-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60212-9)

- Ginsberg, D. (2009). Book Review: *Eating Animals. Shelf Awareness*. Retrieved from <http://www.shelf-awareness.com/issue.html?issue=1036#m7739>
- Green, M. (2006). Narratives and cancer communication. *Journal of Communication*, 56(s1), S163-S183. [doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00288.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00288.x)
- Holt, J. & Cartmell, D. (2013). Consumer perceptions of the U.S. agriculture industry before and after watching the film Food, Inc. *Journal of Applied Communications*, 97(3). [doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1115](https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1115)
- Hormes J. M., Rozin P., Green M. C. & Fincher K. (2013). Reading a book can change your mind, but only some changes last for a year: Food attitude changes in readers of The Omnivore's Dilemma. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4, 778. [doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00778](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00778)
- Let's Move! (2015). Eat Healthy. Let's Move! America's move to raise a healthier generation of kids. Retrieved from <https://letsmove.obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/eat-healthy>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2002) *Qualitative communication research methods* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). California: Sage Publications, Inc.
- McDonald, A. (2010). What's his beef? *New Statesman*, 53–54.
- Meyers, C., Irlbeck, E. & Fletcher, K. (2011). Postsecondary students' reactions to agricultural documentaries: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of Applied Communications*, 95(3), 8. [doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1167](https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1167)
- Nolan, J. & Nail, P. (2014). Further evidence that individuals with a high preference for consistency are more susceptible to cognitive dissonance. *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research*, 19, 4, 214–219. Retrieved from <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=4ffedc63-9c5a-47aa-8b90-cd2a9d765867%40sessionmgr4009>
- Pollan, M. (2006). *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A natural history of four meals*. London: The Penguin Press.
- Safran Foer, J. (2009). *Eating Animals*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.
- Schlosser, E. (2001). *Fast food nation: The dark side of the All-American meal*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Spurlock, M. (Producer and Director). (2004). *Super Size Me*. USA: Samuel Goldwyn Films
- Van Laer, T., Ruyter, K., Visconti, L. M., & Wetzels, M. (2013). The extended transportation imagery model: A meta-analysis of the antecedents and consequences of consumers' narrative transportation. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40(5), 797–817. [doi: 10.1086/673383](https://doi.org/10.1086/673383)
- Wright, R. R., & Sandlin, J. A. (2009). You are what you eat!?: Television cooking shows, consumption, and lifestyle practices as adult learning. In *Honoring Our Past, Embracing Our Future: Proceedings of the 50th Annual Adult Education Research Conference* (pp. 402–407).

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gillian Spolarich is a communications assistant at the U.S. House of Representatives and an alumna of the College of Charleston.

Amanda Ruth-McSwain is an associate professor and program director in the Department of Communication at the College of Charleston.

Lisa Lundy is an associate professor in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida.