

Dinner Diaries: A Dinner Diary Study

Bridget McTiernan | IS375 Course Research Project | May 2026

Research Questions

What does a person's dinner actually say about the day they had?
Can yesterday's dinner accurately reflect today's mood?
Does the quality of someone's day impact the satisfaction of their meal?
Does the source of who made the meal affect satisfaction?

Abstract

This diary study explored the relationship between what people eat for dinner and how they feel about their day. Over one week in May 2026, 19 participants logged 87 dinner entries through a daily Jotform survey, each including a photo, a short description of the day and the meal, the time of dinner, who prepared it, and 1-5 ratings of both the day and the food. Analysis combined qualitative reading of the daily descriptions with quantitative summaries of the rating data. The study found that day ratings and food satisfaction were moderately linked, that food sources had a strong relationship with food satisfaction (family-cooked meals rated highest, dining hall lowest), and that participants tended to have stable ratings across the week rather than dramatic day-to-day swings. The study suggests that dinner functions less as an isolated daily event and more as a contextual artifact shaped by the wider circumstances of the week.

Rationale

This study was inspired by the r/kitchencells subreddit, a community where users post photos of bleak, joyless, or chaotic dinners, often eaten alone, late at night, or assembled from whatever was on hand. The community treats these meals as a dark humor about adult life, but the underlying pattern raises a real question: what does a person's dinner actually say about the day they had? In looking deeper and deciding the method I wanted to go about the study, I also found another subreddit, r/GirlDinnerDiaries— a similar, but distinct community which holds both the bleak and the celebratory, and where the name of the study was formed from. The two communities circle the same idea, but from different angles: kitchencells treats the bad dinner as evidence of resignation, with a community that commiserates and mocks; while GirlDinnerDiaries holds both the celebratory posts (crackers and wine by choice), and the distress-signal versions (cereal because nothing else felt possible), with a supportive community holding space for both at once.

Intrigued and inspired by the two distinct but similar communities, this study sits between them, collecting dinners from real people who were having both kinds of weeks, with the day context attached, just like the subreddit format. I decided to collect my own data, so I could report on the more mundane rather than extremes. On both subreddits, people post for a reason, but by collecting my own data, I was able to achieve more of a realistic glimpse into people's lives and situations.

Dinner sits in a specific part of daily life. It is the meal most people have the most choice over, a meal commonly shared with others, as well as a meal that comes at the end of the day when energy, mood, time, and money have already been spent on other things. Because of this, dinner can be intentional or incidental. Together, between the two reddit communities, and my small sample study, it all suggests that dinner is rarely just a food, but instead a snapshot of what someone had the resources, will, and circumstances to put together after their day. For some, dinner is the only meal they eat, and for others it's just another meal.

Recruitment of Participants

Participants were recruited through a convenience sample of friends, classmates, acquaintances, and others in mutual NJIT-based discord servers. The original target was at least 10 daily participants, with the backup plan of asking participants to log for two additional days if recruitment fell short. Instead, I was encouraged by my professor to aim for 30 participants, advice I am glad I followed. In practice, 19 participants submitted at least one diary entry, with only 9 of them logging entries on six or more of the eight days in the study window, and who are referred to throughout as “daily participants”.

Participants were not anonymous, which was a deliberate choice to allow comparison between entries from the same person across the week. Participants were informed that their entries would not be anonymous, and would be visible to me. Demographic information was collected as a part of the last diary entry, which 11 out of the 19 total participants submitted. This data showed that from those who answered, the sample skewed female (8/11), and included a mix of full-time, part-time, and unemployed participants. Student status ranged along with living arrangements, some living with parents, roommates or partners, and school dorms.

An additional challenge I had was that due to recruiting via NJIT-based discord servers, since I sent a mass message to a specific channel, I did not have contact information for all participants. In the future, I would make this a required field as well, so that I could reach out to participants if need be. I attempted to cover my bases in the opposite way however, by including my discord handle in the survey so participants could reach out with any questions. Originally, when the group was smaller, I had my phone number in there, which I decided to remove after opening up the study to a larger group.

Data Collection

The data was collected on an individual basis, with participants given strict formatting guidelines in the form of required survey entries. In each entry, 3 example “dinner diaries” were provided to participants, but this was a drop down menu that could be skipped, so as not to burden them daily, but also give them the option to reference if they needed a reminder. Despite this, entries varied greatly in depth and quality. It was a deliberate choice to combine the “description of day, food they ate” to match the formatting of the inspiration, however in the future I would choose to separate the entries, as several participants misinterpreted this and only did one half of the requirement.

The main daily diary included:

1. [Participant] Name
2. Today's Date
3. Time you ate dinner
4. Short description of day, food they ate
5. Photo of meal
6. Who made/prepared this
 - i. Other
7. How was your day (1-5)
8. How satisfying was your food (1-5)
9. Optional feedback/ anything else you want me to know

On the final day, participants completed a one-time section covering demographics and feedback on the study itself. Overall, the study collected 87 total entries across eight days (May 2nd through May 9th, 2026), with a small number of late entries logged after the original window closed.

Throughout the study, I kept up with the data as it came in. Each Jotform submission was sent directly to my email, so I read every entry the day it was logged. I also sent reminder texts and discord messages each day to participants, at some point between 5-7pm each day. This running engagement meant that themes and patterns began to emerge during collection rather than only at the end, and in lieu of more formal analytic memos, I screenshotted the entries that stood out to me the most. As mentioned previously, I provided examples of the diaries to include what I was looking for specifically, and during the study fought the urge to reach out to specific participants to correct their formatting, so as not to bias the results.

I had one challenge with this, as a participant reached out to me via the optional feedback section, asking me a question, but I had no way to contact them to answer their question. I had inadvertently made contacting me the participant's burden, and in the future would ensure I have the ability to contact all of my participants, to avoid issues like this.

Data Analysis Methods

Analysis took place in two phases that ran in parallel. The first was a qualitative reading of the diary entries, which took place both in the moment, as well as after all collection was completed. Reading all 87 entries surfaced recurring themes such as dinner as a recovery activity, meal prep as a coping strategy during high-workload periods, and snack-like meals (trail mix, ice cream, protein shakes, coffee and popcorn) substituting for full dinners when participants were drained. The second phase was quantitative summarization of the structured fields: averages of food satisfaction by meal source, cross-comparing day vs. food ratings, per-participant variation across the week for daily participants, and examination of whether yesterday's dinner had any relationship to today's day rating. The two phases informed each other throughout. Numerical patterns prompted closer re-readings of specific entries, and qualitative observations suggested what would be most worth examining and visually demonstrating.

A note on the quantitative framing: I had spent so much time the previous week studying for a statistics final exam, and the vocabulary and thinking of the course bled into and shaped how I looked at this data. References to n values, r values, and the chart formats below reflect that recent exposure. The intent was not to run formal statistical tests but to use familiar summary tools to describe and visualize the patterns that emerged from reading the entries.

Written Analysis

Finding 1: Day quality and food satisfaction are linked, but only moderately

The clearest pattern in the rating data is that good days and good meals tend to occur together. Of the 26 entries where participants rated their day a 5, 22 also rated their food a 5. There were almost no “great food” ratings on average days, with only 2 of the 28 entries with a day rating of 3 including a food rating of 5. The data clusters along the top right corner, diagonally, and with the bottom-left almost empty.

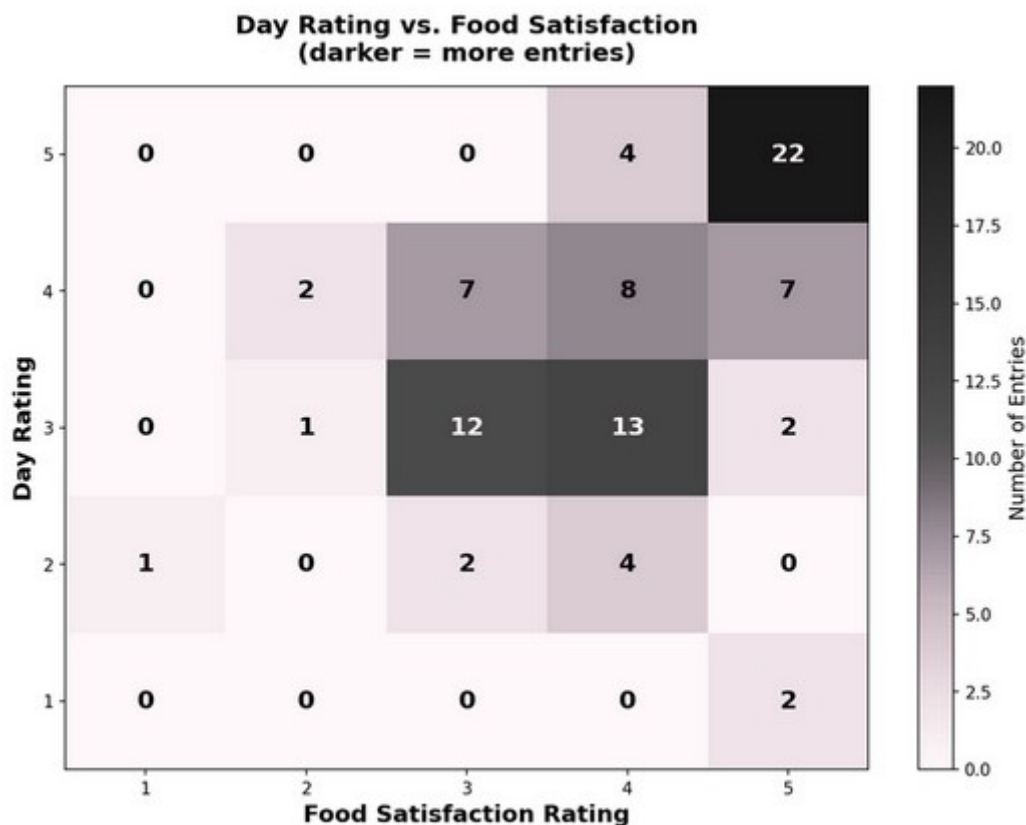


Figure 1: heatmap of day rating against food satisfaction across all 87 entries

The direction of the relationship, however, cannot be determined from the data alone. A good day might encourage participants to have a more satisfying meal, a good meal might raise the rating of an otherwise bad day. Or, both ratings could be due to a third factor, such as time, energy or money. Another important note, is since this was completed during finals week, students may be eating differently than they otherwise would. Though designed with simplicity

in mind, having both factors together being collected at the same time on the same form, may influence each other.

Finding 2: Who prepared the meal matters

When entries are grouped by meal source, a clear pattern arises. Family-prepared meals scored highest (4.89 average), followed by restaurant or ordered out (4.34), then partner or friend at 3.67. Self cooked meals (3.62) scored only slightly higher than pre-packaged (3.57). The lowest was the dining hall at 2.67.

The family-cooked category contains only 9 entries from 6 distinct participants, with Ashlee (3 entries) and Chelsea (2 entries) accounting for more than half. Both of these participants had generally high day ratings throughout the week, which may be partially inflating the family-prepared average. Different participants used the 1-5 scale differently, with some rating most meals a 5 (ex. Chelsea) and others rarely going above a 3 (ex. Tony). These raw category averages mix "the meals were better" with "this category happened to include participants who rate everything highly." In the future, this can be compared with taking each participant's averages relative to their own responses, but we will not go into that detail in this report.

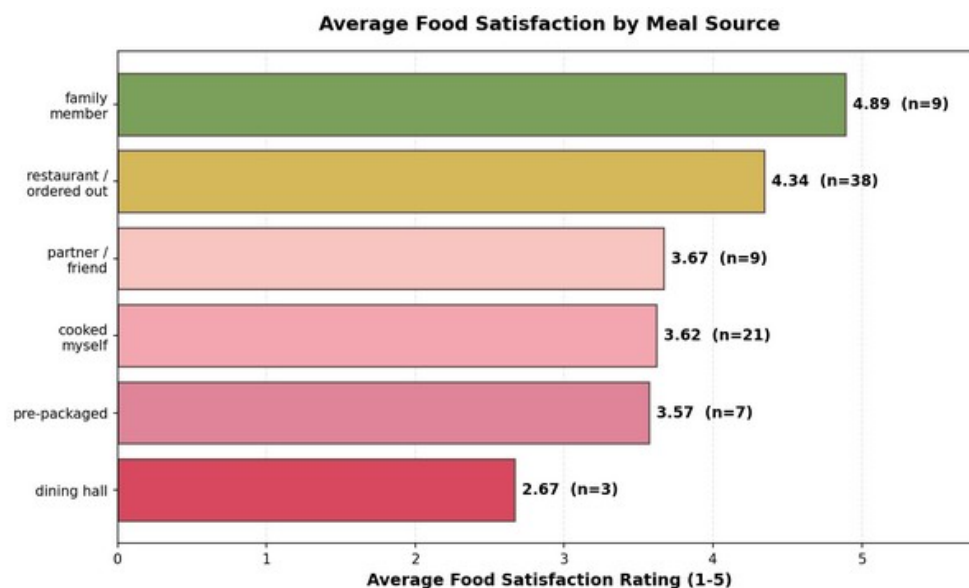


Figure 2: Average food satisfaction rating by meal source. (n=number of entries)

Without taking into account the participants' rating habits themselves, the gap between family-cooked and self-cooked is the most striking. Participants rated meals their family made for them more than a full point higher than meals they made for themselves. This is not easily explained by the food alone. Demonstrated by the dinner diaries, food really is better when someone else makes it for you. The likely explanation is that the experience of being cooked for, or of not having to plan or execute the meal, is itself part of the satisfaction. Importantly, participants were asked to rank satisfaction, not taste of the meal. Restaurant meals scoring almost as highly as family supports this reading as well, that the absence of effort rather than the

presence of a specific person preparing it makes the difference. Interestingly, however, the low dining hall average suggests that institutional university cooking does not reflect this same satisfaction effect.

Susan's Meal Prep Routine

Susan logged seven entries during the study, and her diary reads as a study in meal-prep-as-survival during finals week. Across the week, she describes the same components repeatedly: pasta with impossible meat, plain Greek yogurt with black pepper, broccoli, and leftover manakish pizza. Her descriptions become increasingly resigned, with one entry directly stating, "i am eating less good meals than usual bc of finals week and i meal prep a lot." Her day ratings stayed in the 2-4 range and her food ratings a 3-4, never dipping low and never spiking high. The pattern illustrates a coping strategy that is functional rather than joyful, where the meal is solved as a logistical problem at the start of the week and executed identically each evening.

Alex's Protein Shake Resignation

Alex logged eight entries, with a pattern almost opposite to Susan's. Where Susan reused the same prepped components night after night, Alex defaults to a liquid or single component meal when he is drained: a protein shake, a smoothie, or a yogurt with a banana. His descriptions repeatedly include the phrase "didn't feel like eating" before downgrading dinner to a beverage. His highest-rated meals (food rating of 5) cluster on days where someone else was involved in cooking, including Korean BBQ with the family on his day off (5/5 day too), chicken noodle soup made by his brother, and ribs and chicken he grilled on a relaxed Friday off from work. His lowest rated meals (and days) are work-day protein shakes and Fairlife drinks consumed alone after long shifts. This pattern suggest that for him dinner is functioning less as a meal and more as a nutrition checkbox on the days that take the most out of him. The meal shrinks in proportion to the energy he has left at the end of the day.

Finding 3: People had a “week,” not seven separate days

A core assumption of a daily diary study is that each day produces a distinct data point. In this study, that assumption only partially held. Among the nine daily participants, day ratings were remarkably consistent across the week. Two participants rated every single day a 5. One participant never rated a day higher than a 3. Most others varied by no more than two points across all of their entries.

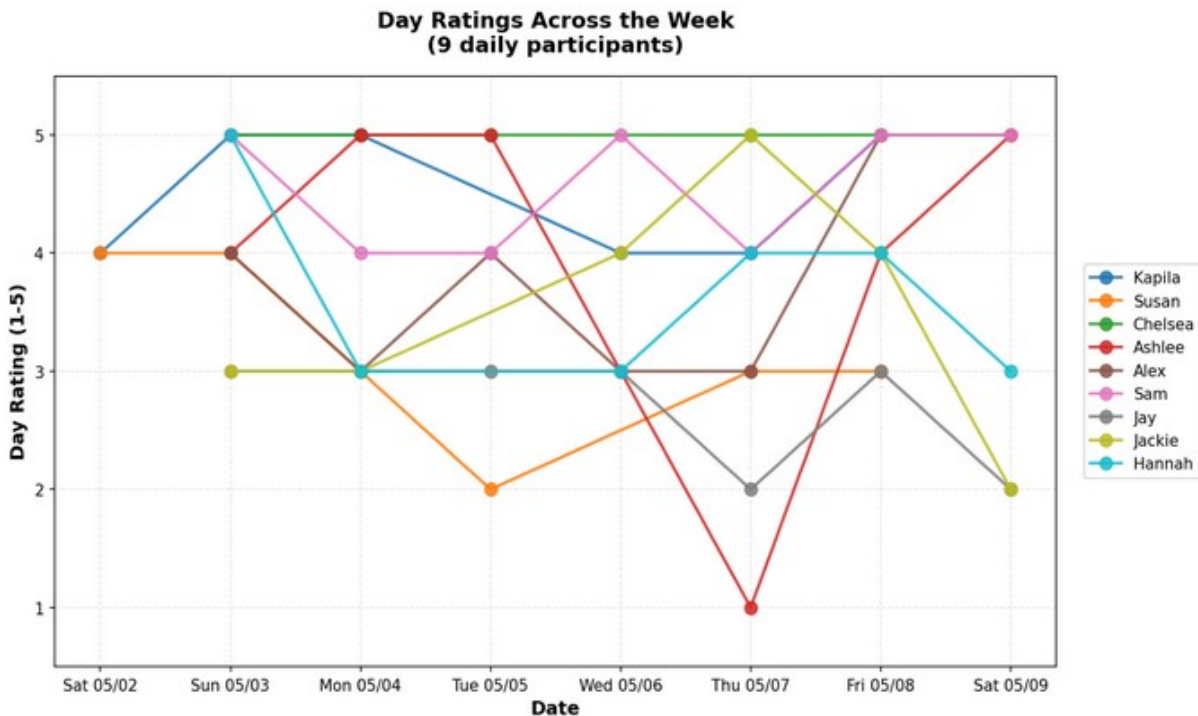


Figure 3: Day ratings across the study week for the 9 daily participants

Only Ashlee showed genuine day-to-day variation, ranging from a 1 on May 7th to 5s on multiple other days. The implication for the original research question is significant. The premise of comparing “good day meals” to “bad day meals” assumes participants have both within a short window, which was not really demonstrated in this week-long study. In this sample, most participants had a generally good, average, or difficult week. Daily variation existed within those baselines, but rarely produced the high-contrast comparison the study was designed to capture. This finding does not invalidate other patterns, but reframes them. The link between day quality and food satisfaction (Finding 1) is partly a link between participants who were having a good week and the meals they ate during that good week, rather than what I was expecting to be a same-person mood-to-meal cause.

Ashlee’s Outlier Day

Ashlee was the only daily participant whose day ratings showed real variation. Her food on her 1-rated day was her most indulgent: “chocolate and vanilla ice cream. Long day, skipped dinner and went straight to desert.” She rated her food a 5/5, even when she

rated the day only 1/5. Her ratings immediately rebounded the next day, which suggests food could have been a recovery mechanism where her satisfying meal functioned as a response to the bad day rather than evidence of a good one.

Tony's Wendy's Saga

Tony's five entries describe a week of repetitive, low-effort dinners eaten late after long warehouse shifts. His ratings stayed low throughout. On May 7th, he rated his day a 2 and his food a 3. On May 8, he went to Wendy's at around 12:17am, and on top of a 2/5 day, they gave him the wrong food. He rated this disappointment as a 1, the lowest in the entire dataset. On May 9th, he returns to Wendy's, specifically to receive the food they owed him, and closed, saying: "They gave me the right food this time :D". His day rating bounced to a 4 and his food rating to a 4. This arc captures something the numbers alone cannot: dinner can be a small redemption, or, for Tony, a way on closing yesterday's loop.

Finding 3.5: Yesterday's dinner and today's day

Matching each day's food rating to the next day's rating for participants (43 usable pairs), I found that the correlation between today's food and tomorrow's day was low-to-moderate ($r=0.31$). This is nearly identical to the same-day food-day correlation ($r=0.32$), suggesting it is not really a separate phenomenon as expected. The strongest correlation was between today's day rating, and tomorrow's day rating ($r=0.45$). The best predictor of how someone is going to feel tomorrow is how they felt today. Mood is sticky, and dinner seems to follow along, rather than shape it.

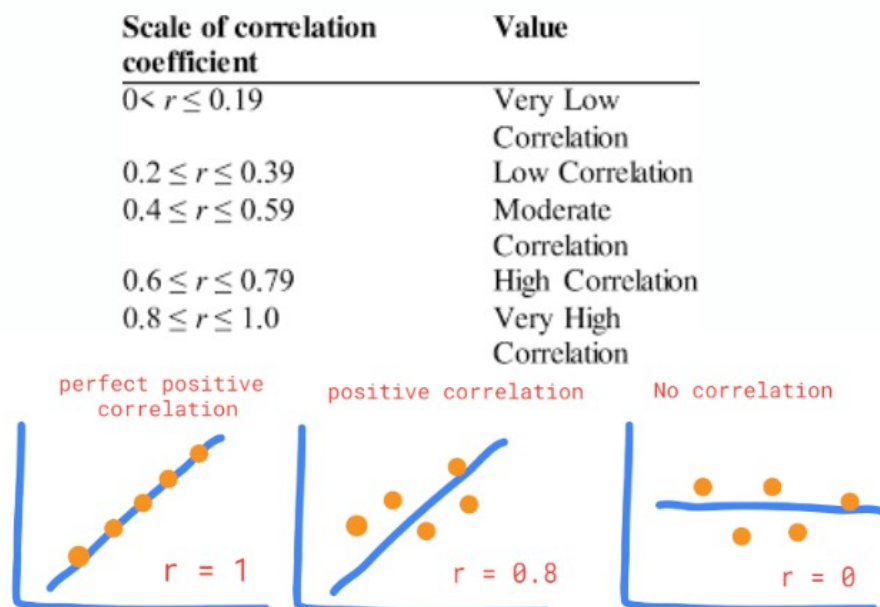


Figure 4: Explanation of r , coefficient correlation values

Alex's User Journey Map

day	satisfaction	context	meal	prepared by	quote	photo
3/5 	5/5 	may 2nd 8th day in a row at work. 	Chicken/rice, bean salad, skinnit steak.	brother	No highlights, just lows. I'm pretty tired. It's been a long week. Well, it's been a long life.	
4/5 	5/5 	may 3rd	dinner with the family Korean BBQ	restaurant	Overall, it was a really good day. Back to work tomorrow. The heeons persist, but so do I.	
3/5 	5/5 	may 4th 	chicken noodle soup with sprinich noodles.	brother	Overall, today was okay. Now I'm going to shower, doom scroll until I fall asleep, and wake up wondering why it's morning so soon.	
4/5 	5/5 	may 5th it's Thursday, isn't? 	protein smoothie: sprinich, Transparent Labs protein powder, chia seeds, ground flaxseed, banana, and 2% milk.	myself	Gonna shower and then toss and turn in bed over something I said five years ago that no one laughed at.	
3/5 	3/5 	may 6th Today is Wednesday, and the fight continues. I woke up, did my workout routine, and headed back to the salt mines. 	I wasn't really in the mood for dinner and just had a Fairlife protein shake tonight.	pre-packaged	Flying conditions were subpar today it was a rainy day... Time to shower and see if these home run pants are gonna fit. Ohana has been pretty mid lately. Time in tomorrow.	
3/5 	3/5 	may 7th You guessed it I woke up, had coffee, caught up on the BS going on around the world, worked out, and went to work. 	I don't really feel like eating dinner tonight, so I'm gonna have a yogurt with a banana instead. Serenit.	myself	You guessed it I woke up, had coffee, caught up on the BS going on around the world, worked out, and went to work. I had a Fiber Sovel from Chipotle for a late lunch today and it was just okay.	
5/5 	5/5 	may 8th Ap yo, it's Freaky Friday. Wake up and took a rest day from working out. I was off from work today, so I did laundry and cleaned up.	Right now I'm grillin' some pork ribs and chicken, gonna make some rice, and that's it for today.	myself	Woke up and took a rest day from working out. I was off from work today, so I did laundry and cleaned up. My cat tipped over a plant and broke my dog's water bowl, she's so cute, I love [her]	
3/5 	3/5 	may 12th got up today, had my morning coffee (with water first), and did my usual cardio workout. It was another long day at work. 	I'm not really hungry, so I'm just going to drink a protein shake.	pre-packaged	I'm not really physically tired, it's more mental. Pretending to be "on" all the time is very draining.	

<https://www.figma.com/board/1YD4hOGATSOGBp57vUhK8a/Untitled?node-id=0-1&t=IYwn7FpZUDyZge3p-1>

Conclusion

Dinner is rarely a standalone event. It is shaped by the day around it, the person who prepared it, and the broader circumstances of the week. Day quality and food satisfaction were moderately linked, but the direction of that link cannot be established from the data alone. Meal source had a clearer relationship with satisfaction: family-cooked meals scored highest, restaurant meals nearly as high, and dining hall meals lowest. Self-prepared meals scored only marginally higher than pre-packaged, suggesting that the experience of benign cooked for rather than the food itself is part of what makes a meal satisfying. The most unexpected finding was that participants were largely consistent across the week. What looked like a “good day vs bad day” study in the beginning, turned out to be closer to a “good week vs bad week” study.

Limitations included the short duration, convenience-sample recruitments, and inconsistent length and detail of participant descriptions. Several data quality issues surfaces, including a participant entering their birthday in place of the date, duplicate first names (Viktoria vs Victoria) that required clarification with the participants, and recurring failure to take photos of the meals before eating them. Many participants did not complete the demographic section, which limited subgroup analysis. A longer study, more standardized form, a larger and more diverse sample, and separation of the day rating from the meal rating would all strengthen future studies. Additionally, through more statistical analysis the information could be refined, such as within each participant. Even with these limitations, the data tells a coherent story that dinner is less a measurement of a day and more of a small part of the day.