

# **Addictive Tendencies Towards Food: A Mixed-Methods Analysis of ‘Food Addiction’ and Related Psychopathologies**

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**Background:** Obesity is a leading cause of premature mortality in Canada. Tackling this pandemic solely through diet and exercise interventions has not been a wholly successful approach to the problem, particularly in the case of those with advanced obesity (i.e. body mass index  $\geq 40$ ). This may partially be attributable to evidence that ultra-processed foods are highly rewarding for certain individuals, and can initiate an *addictive* behavioural and neurological response, akin to that seen in other substance-use disorders. While the concept of ‘*food addiction*’ (FA) has been accepted by the public for decades, it has been vigorously debated in the scientific community, particularly due to its marked overlap with binge-eating disorder (BED).

**Purpose and objectives:** More research is required to establish whether FA represents a unique condition to that of BED, and resembles other conventional substance-use disorders. The proposed research will investigate this in two studies using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies:

1. The first study will build on our previous work which examined whether FA can manifest as compulsive patterns of intake that use other patterns of overeating in addition to bingeing – for example, by engaging in compulsive grazing. We will carry out this study in a sample of those with obesity, since the severity and prevalence of FA is expected to be greater in this population.
2. The second study will explore qualitatively how individuals with and without addictive-like eating symptoms and BED conceptualize their eating behaviours, and, whether they subscribe to the view that overeating can become an addictive behavior for themselves and/or others.

**Methodology:** Our quantitative study (n=200) will be the first to examine compulsive grazing in the context of FA in a sample of adults with obesity. Data obtained from a sample of treatment-seeking patients at a weight-loss clinic will be analyzed using logistic and multiple regression modelling. Our qualitative study (n=32) will be the first to phenomenologically examine FA through the perspectives of four distinct groups of individuals: 1) those with FA; 2) those with BED; 3) those with BED and FA; and 4) a control group of those with obesity alone. Interviews will be analyzed using thematic analysis.

**Contributions:** To the best of our knowledge, both of the proposed studies have never been previously conducted. If FA does reflect an independent compulsive condition, then it may help explain why certain individuals who continuously attempt to lose weight (via lifestyle changes – even surgical interventions) repeatedly fail to do so despite experiencing profound health, emotional, and/or social consequences.