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# **A systematic review and meta-analysis of the social facilitation of eating**

Helen K. Ruddock, Jeffrey M. Brunstrom, Lenny R. Vartanian, & Suzanne Higgs

**Author affiliations:**

School of Psychology, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK (HR and SH)

Department of Experimental Psychology, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK (JB)

School of Psychology, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia (LV)

**Author last names:**

Ruddock

Brunstrom

Vartanian

Higgs

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**Corresponding author:**

Helen K. Ruddock, School of Psychology, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, B15 2TT, UK.

[Helen.ruddock@bham.ac.uk](mailto:Helen.ruddock@bham.ac.uk)

Tel. 0121 4147173

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## Abstract

**Background:** Research suggests that people tend to eat more when eating with other people compared with when they eat alone, and this is known as the social facilitation of eating. However, little is known about *when* and *why* this phenomenon occurs.

**Objective:** This review aimed to quantify the evidence for social facilitation of eating and identify moderating factors and underlying mechanisms.

**Design:** We systematically reviewed studies that used experimental and non-experimental approaches to examine food intake/food choice as a function of the number of co-eaters. The following databases were searched during April 2019: PsychInfo, Embase, Medline, and Social Sciences Citation Index. Studies that used naturalistic techniques were narratively synthesized, and meta-analyses were conducted to synthesize results from experimental studies.

**Results:** 42 studies were reviewed. We found strong evidence that people select and eat more when eating with friends compared with when they eat alone ( $Z=5.32$ ,  $p<0.001$ , Standardized Mean Difference (SMD)=0.76, 95% Confidence Intervals (CIs)=0.48, 1.03). The meta-analysis revealed no evidence for social facilitation across studies that had examined food intake when participants ate alone or with strangers/acquaintances ( $Z=1.32$ ,  $p=0.19$ , SMD=0.21, 95% CIs=-0.10, 0.51). There was some evidence that social facilitation of eating is moderated by gender, weight status, and food type. However, this evidence was limited by a lack of experimental research examining the moderating effect of these factors on social facilitation of eating amongst *friends*. **In two studies, there was evidence** that the effect of social context on eating may be partly mediated by longer meal duration and perceived ‘appropriateness’ of eating.

**Conclusion:** Findings suggest that eating with others increases food intake relative to eating alone, and this is moderated by the familiarity of co-eaters. The review identifies potential

26 mechanisms for social facilitation of eating and highlights the need for further research to  
27 establish mediating factors. Finally, we propose a new theoretical framework in which we  
28 suggest that the social facilitation of eating has evolved as an efficient evolutionary  
29 adaptation.

30 **Keywords:** Social facilitation; Social influences; Food intake; Food choice; Meta-analysis

## 31 **A systematic review and meta-analysis of the social facilitation of eating**

33

### 34 **1. Introduction**

35

36 Social factors are important in determining what and how much we eat (1). The tendency for  
37 people to eat more when eating in groups than when eating alone is known as the ‘social  
38 facilitation of eating’. Social facilitation effects have been well-documented across a range of  
39 cognitive and physical tasks, and it is thought that the presence of other people potentiates  
40 dominant responses (2). In the presence of food, the dominant response is to eat. De Castro  
41 and colleagues (3) describe social facilitation as “the most important and all pervasive  
42 influence on eating yet identified” (p.100). Given that 77% of adults in the UK eat as a  
43 household at least once a week (4), and that a substantial proportion of people’s meals are  
44 eaten with others (5), it is important to establish *when* and *why* social context facilitates food  
45 intake.

46

47 Research on the social facilitation of eating examines eating behavior when participants eat in  
48 larger or smaller social groups (or alone). Social facilitation effects on eating have been  
49 examined using both experimental methods, in which group size is experimentally  
50 manipulated, and non-experimental methods, in which eating behavior is examined within  
51 real-world contexts. Non-experimental research into social facilitation of eating have gathered

52 data using self-report (i.e. food diaries/ecological momentary assessment) and researcher-  
53 observation methods. Research examining social facilitation of eating has typically used naive  
54 volunteers who are free to eat as much or as little as they like, and comparisons are made  
55 between the eating behavior (e.g. food intake) of participants eating alone and the eating  
56 behavior of participants eating with other people. Some social facilitation studies have also  
57 examined associations between the number of people present at a meal and amounts  
58 consumed (this is known as the ‘social correlation’).

59  
60 There have been two recent narrative reviews of the social facilitation of eating (6,7) . These  
61 reviews concluded that the social facilitation of eating is a robust phenomenon, yet the  
62 underlying cause(s) remain unclear. A systematic review and meta-analysis of the literature  
63 on the social facilitation of eating would build on existing narrative reviews to quantify the  
64 size of the effect of social facilitation and formally identify moderators and mediators. In this  
65 paper, we present results from a systematic review and meta-analysis that aimed to assess  
66 quantitative evidence for the social facilitation of eating and to identify moderating factors.  
67 We include both naturalistic and experimental studies which examined food intake or choice  
68 as a function of group size in human participants. We also draw conclusions on the current  
69 evidence regarding the mechanisms underlying the social facilitation of eating and, in doing  
70 so, we identify gaps in the existing knowledge base and provide directions for future research.

71

72

## 73 2. Methods

### 74 2.1. Eligibility criteria

75 We included studies with human volunteers of any age that had used naturalistic or  
76 experimental approaches to examine food intake or food choice as a function of the  
77 presence of co-eaters. Experimental studies were excluded if both group size and  
78 environmental context were manipulated simultaneously (e.g. examining food intake  
79 when participants ate alone in a laboratory context and with others in a cafeteria setting)  
80 (8-10). Because social facilitation effects on eating are thought to occur when eating in  
81 the presence of other co-eaters (i.e. *not* with passive observers) (11), we excluded studies  
82 which examined food intake when participants ate in the presence of others who were *not*  
83 eating (e.g. 12). Only studies published in English were included.

### 84 2.2. Search strategy

85 The search strategy was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews  
86 and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (13). Relevant studies were identified by searching the  
87 following electronic databases during April 2019: PsychInfo, Embase, Medline, and  
88 Social Sciences Citation Index. We searched for papers that contained the term ‘social  
89 facilitation’ in addition to either ‘food choice,’ ‘food intake,’ ‘food selection’ or ‘eating’.  
90 Search limiters included human subjects and studies published in English. These  
91 electronic searches were supplemented with a manual search of the citation list of relevant  
92 articles. Two reviewers independently screened all search results for their eligibility by  
93 examining titles and abstracts. No disagreements were reported. The full text of  
94 potentially relevant papers was then screened.

### 95 **2.3. Quality assessment**

96 Quality checks for randomized control trials and epidemiological studies were not relevant as  
97 these approaches were not used in any of the studies identified in the current review. We  
98 recorded whether attempts to disguise the study aims were reported (in both experimental and  
99 diary/ecological momentary assessment studies), and whether demand awareness was  
100 assessed and reported. Funnel plots were inspected to check for publication bias amongst  
101 experimental studies that were included in the meta-analysis (supplementary figure 1).

### 102 **2.4. Data extraction**

103 For each study, we extracted the following information: (1) sample characteristics, (2)  
104 design, (3) primary outcome measures, (4) main findings, and (5) whether any moderators  
105 or mechanisms were tested or identified. If data required for the meta-analysis (e.g. means  
106 and standard deviations) were missing, lead authors on manuscripts were contacted and  
107 asked to provide the necessary information. Missing standard deviation values were  
108 calculated based on the observed mean difference between conditions and the  
109 corresponding *p* value (14).

### 110 **2.5. Data synthesis**

111 An inverse variance meta-analysis was used to combine the results from experimental  
112 studies that had compared food intake when participants ate alone and with other people.  
113 Revman (Cochrane) version 5.3.5. was used to calculate the standardized weighted mean  
114 difference (SMD) between 'alone' and 'social' eating conditions for each study. A  
115 positive SMD indicates that people ate more when eating socially compared with when  
116 they ate alone. Confidence Intervals (95%) and  $I^2$  values were also provided to assess  
117 statistical heterogeneity. Where high levels of heterogeneity were observed, we calculated  
118 the random effects weighted mean difference. Subgroup analyses were conducted to

119 compare findings from studies that had examined social facilitation when participants ate  
120 with their friends with studies that had examined eating with groups of strangers or  
121 acquaintances. Standardized mean differences were calculated separately for each  
122 subgroup. Some studies compared social facilitation effects across different populations  
123 (e.g. in overweight and non-overweight participants) and so these provided more than one  
124 comparison to the analysis. For studies that compared food intake when participants ate in  
125 larger versus smaller sized groups, mean values were collapsed across all groups.

126

127 Owing to the limited number of experimental studies, those that examined the effect of  
128 social facilitation on other aspects of eating (e.g. food choice) were narratively  
129 synthesized. Similarly, studies that did not include an eat-alone condition, or which used  
130 non-experimental methods, were unsuitable for inclusion in the meta-analysis and were  
131 therefore narratively synthesized.

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### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Search results

Initial searches identified 263 publications, of which 65 were fully assessed. A further 25 articles were excluded on the following basis: no variation in group size (n=16); did not measure food intake or choice when eating with other people (n=5); did not compare group vs. alone under similar conditions (n=3); and repeated findings from another study (n=1). Two articles (15, 16) each reported two separate studies that met the eligibility criteria, and so 42 studies were included from 40 publications (**Figure 1**). Some studies did not meet the inclusion criteria in the systematic review/meta-analysis but nonetheless provide insight into the moderators and mechanisms involved in social facilitation of eating (12, 17-22). We therefore include these in our wider discussion of the literature.

#### 3.2 Study type

Studies were classified based on the methodology used: 14 used an experimental approach, and 28 used non-experimental methods. Of the non-experimental studies, six studies recorded data using naturalistic observation methods, and 22 used diary or ecological momentary assessment methods. Of the studies that used diary/ecological momentary assessment methods, 13 reported original data and 9 used reanalyzed datasets from previous diary studies. To avoid duplication of data across reanalyzed and original diary studies, reanalyzed datasets were not included when discussing the strength of the effect of social facilitation. Instead, findings from these studies were used only to provide insight into moderators and mechanisms of the social facilitation of eating. An overview of the included studies is presented in **Table 1**.

### 155 3.3. Overview of study designs and participants

#### 156 3.3.1. *Experimental research*

157 Across the 14 studies that used experimental approaches, data were collected from a total of  
158 1,004 participants. With the exception of one study (23), all studies reported the mean age of  
159 participants. Social facilitation was examined across a range of age groups, including:  
160 children (mean age range=4 - 8 years) (24-26), adolescents aged 15-16 years (27,28), older  
161 adults (mean age=68 years) (29), and adults (mean age 22-41) (15, 30-35). The majority  
162 (n=10) of studies recruited both male and female participants, two recruited females only (30,  
163 31), and two recruited males only (27, 32). Four studies did not report participants' weight  
164 status (15, 23, 24, 35), three specifically recruited roughly equal numbers of overweight and  
165 non-overweight participants (25, 27, 32), and one study restricted recruitment to non-  
166 overweight participants (26). Across the six studies that did not restrict recruitment on the  
167 basis of weight status (and which reported Body Mass Index, BMI), the mean BMI ranged  
168 from 21 kg/m<sup>2</sup> to 26 kg/m<sup>2</sup>.

169  
170 The majority of studies compared eating behavior when participants ate alone with when  
171 participants ate with others (n=12). Two studies did not include an alone condition but  
172 compared eating behavior when participants ate in smaller versus larger groups (15, 24). In  
173 the majority of studies (n=13), the primary outcome measure was the amount eaten. One  
174 study recorded the number of dishes ordered in a mock restaurant scenario (15).

##### 175 3.3.1.1. *Quality Assessment*

176 Nine of the 14 experimental studies reported using a cover story to disguise the aim of the  
177 study (15, 23, 25, 26, 31-35). However, only one study reported examining whether  
178 participants were aware of the study aims (31). In this study, two participants (out of 120)

179 indicated that they were aware of the aims of the study. Inspection of funnel plots  
180 revealed no evidence of publication bias in experimental studies (supplementary figure 1).

### 181 **3.3.2. Non-experimental research**

#### 182 *3.3.2.1. Diary/Ecological momentary assessment studies*

183 Across the 13 studies which used diary methods (original datasets only), data were obtained  
184 from a total of 5047 participants. The majority of studies (n=12) examined the social  
185 facilitation of eating in adults (mean age range 21 - 53 years), and one study examined social  
186 facilitation effects in young infants (mean age=13 months) (36). Three studies recruited  
187 females only (37-39), and the remaining nine studies included both males and females. Of the  
188 studies that examined social facilitation in adults, three did not report the participants' weight  
189 status (37,40, 41), one study specifically recruited women with obesity (mean BMI=32 kg/m<sup>2</sup>)  
190 (39) and one study recruited female participants with underweight (mean BMI=19 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) and  
191 normal weight (mean BMI=24 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) based on Metropolitan Height and Weight tables (38).  
192 For studies that did not restrict recruitment on the basis of weight status, the mean BMI  
193 ranged from 20 kg/m<sup>2</sup> to 25 kg/m<sup>2</sup>. One study specifically recruited participants with treated  
194 or untreated bulimia (37), and one study recruited participants with type-1 diabetes (42).  
195 Finally, one study (43) specifically recruited representative samples from French (n=26),  
196 Dutch (n=50), and American (n=140) populations.

197  
198 Nine studies examined data that had been collected in previous research (3, 44-51). The mean  
199 age of participants in these datasets ranged from 32 to 44 years, and all studies analyzed data  
200 from both male and female participants. In these reanalyzed datasets, the mean BMI of  
201 participants ranged from 23 kg/m<sup>2</sup> to 26 kg/m<sup>2</sup>. Two studies did not report BMI (3, 45).

202

203 In studies using diary methods, participants recorded everything they ate, the start and end  
204 time of each meal (to determine meal duration), levels of hunger and fullness, and the number  
205 of people who were present at each meal. In some studies, participants also recorded their  
206 mood (38, 39, 42) and the amount that they intended to eat (16).

207

208 Schüz and colleagues (52) used an ecological momentary assessment task in which  
209 participants recorded (a) whether other people were eating in their immediate environment  
210 (i.e. social eating cues) and (b) the extent to which they felt that eating was appropriate and  
211 encouraged. Records were taken whenever participants ate a snack, and at randomly timed  
212 prompts throughout the day.

213

214 The majority (n=19) of diary/ecological momentary assessment studies (original and  
215 reanalyzed datasets) examined eating behavior as a function of group size, and seven  
216 compared eating behavior when participants ate alone with when they ate with others (39-41,  
217 44, 51-53). In the majority (n=21) of original and reanalyzed datasets, the primary outcome  
218 variable was the calorie content of a meal. Notably, the primary outcome of one study was the  
219 probability and amount of meat consumption (41). However, for the purpose of the current  
220 review, we also extracted the *total* energy content of meals reported in this study. In one  
221 study, the primary outcome was whether a snack was being consumed at each moment of  
222 assessment (52). Diary/ecological momentary assessment measures were taken over four (16,  
223 41), seven (36-38, 40, 42, 43, 53, 54), or 14 days (39, 52).

#### 224 3.2.2.2. *Researcher-observed behavior*

225 Researcher-observed behaviors were recorded from a total of 3,600 people and, in every case,  
226 both male and female diners were assessed. In three studies, participants' age was estimated:  
227 Brindal and colleagues (55) estimated that 83.4% were between 15 and 25 years, Krantz (56)

228 estimated the median age to be 27-28 years, and Maykovich (57) estimated that their sample  
229 was between 30-50 years. Subjects' weight status was estimated in three studies: 69% (57)  
230 and 82% (55) of subjects were rated as non-overweight in two of the studies, and another  
231 study specifically sought to observe approximately equal numbers of subjects with (n=101)  
232 and without (n=96) obesity (56).

233

234 Observations were conducted in fast-food and formal dining restaurants (15, 55, 57, 58), and  
235 in university or work cafeterias (56, 59). Three studies compared social facilitation effects  
236 when subjects ate alone to when they ate in groups (56-58), and four examined the effect of  
237 group size on eating behavior (15, 55, 58, 59). The primary outcome variables included the  
238 amount eaten (55, 57, 58), the calorie content of foods selected (56, 59), and the number of  
239 dishes ordered (15).

## 240 **3.4. Study findings**

### 241 ***3.4.1. Meta-analysis results***

242 Of the 12 experimental studies that included an 'alone' condition, eight reported evidence of  
243 social facilitation (23, 25, 26, 29, 31-33, 35). Data from 11 studies (comprising 17  
244 comparisons) that examined food intake when participants ate alone and with others were  
245 entered into a meta-analysis. Data from one study were not included due to the pseudo-  
246 experimental method used (35). In separate blocks of five consecutive days, participants were  
247 asked to eat all of their meals 'only with other people,' 'only alone,' and 'as normal,' and to  
248 record everything that they ate during each phase. This study was therefore methodologically  
249 different to other experimental research in which group size was manipulated and examined  
250 under controlled conditions.

251

252 The meta-analysis revealed an overall significant effect of social context on food intake,  
253  $Z=2.57$ ,  $p=0.01$ ,  $SMD=0.35$ , 95% Confidence Intervals (CIs)=0.08, 0.61 (**Figure 2**). A high  
254 level of heterogeneity was detected across comparisons ( $I^2=72\%$ ), and the forest plot suggests  
255 that stronger social facilitation effects are observed when people eat with friends and family  
256 members than when they eat with strangers. We therefore conducted a subgroup analysis in  
257 which studies that specifically examined food intake in groups of friends were analyzed  
258 separately from studies that tested groups of strangers/acquaintances. Specifically,  
259 comparisons from studies that had specifically aimed to recruit groups of people who knew  
260 each other were included in the 'friends' subgroup. Comparisons from studies that had  
261 examined social facilitation effects in strangers, or which had not attempted to recruit groups  
262 of friends, were included in the 'strangers/acquaintances' subgroup. Notably, some  
263 comparisons within this subgroup involved participants who were recruited from the same  
264 school or workplace and who may therefore have been acquainted (e.g. 27, 28, 32, 34). Of  
265 these, one study assessed the degree to which participants knew each other on a 7-point Likert  
266 scale (1 = not at all, and 7=extremely) (34). The researchers noted substantial variability in  
267 the degree of familiarity between groups (eight groups provided a mean familiarity rating  
268 between 1.00-1.99, and five groups provided a mean rating between 6.00-6.99).

269

270

#### 271 *3.4.1.1. Subgroup analysis*

272 Four studies compared food intake when participants ate alone and with friends, and 10  
273 studies (contributing 13 comparisons) examined food intake when participants ate alone  
274 and with strangers/acquaintances. Subgroup analysis revealed a significant effect of social  
275 context across studies that compared food intake when participants ate alone and with  
276 friends ( $Z=5.32$ ,  $p< 0.001$ ,  $SMD=0.76$ , 95% CIs=0.48, 1.03). Specifically, these

277 comparisons revealed greater food intake when participants ate with friends compared to  
278 when they ate alone. However, no significant effect of social context was observed in  
279 studies which compared food intake when participants ate alone and with  
280 strangers/acquaintances ( $Z=1.32$ ,  $p=0.19$ ,  $SMD=0.21$ , 95% CIs=-0.10, 0.51).

### 281 **3.4.2. Narrative synthesis**

#### 282 *3.4.2.1. Comparisons between eating alone and eating in groups*

283 In studies using diary techniques, meal size was between 29% and 48% larger when  
284 participants ate with others compared with when they ate alone (40, 44, 53). Horgan et al. (41)  
285 found that participants ate up to 23 percent more calories when eating with friends, family, or  
286 colleagues, relative to when eating alone. Among women with obesity, social meals were  
287 29% larger than meals eaten alone (39). Furthermore, using an Ecological Momentary  
288 Assessment task, Schüz et al. (52) found that the presence of others eating significantly  
289 increased the odds that a measurement occasion represented a ‘snack report,’ compared with a  
290 ‘random report’ (odds ratio=4.18). Two researcher-observed behavior studies found that  
291 subjects eating in groups selected or consumed 12% more calories than did those eating alone  
292 (56, 58). However, Krantz (56) reported this social facilitation effect only in normal weight  
293 subjects; overweight males and females selected 18% *less* food when with others relative to  
294 when eating alone (587 vs. 479 kcals). One researcher-observed behavior study found no  
295 evidence that subjects eating in groups ate more than those eating alone (57).

#### 296 *3.4.2.2. Moderators of the social facilitation of eating*

##### 297 *Familiarity*

298 The results from our meta-analysis suggest that familiarity with one’s dining  
299 companion(s) is a significant moderator of social facilitation effects on eating. No effect  
300 of eating in a group versus eating alone was observed in studies in which the participants

301 were eating with strangers/acquaintances, whereas a significant social facilitation effects  
302 was observed in the small number of studies that tested people in groups of familiar  
303 others (26, 29, 31, 33). These findings are consistent with those obtained from a diary  
304 study in which the amount consumed was predicted by group size when subjects ate with  
305 friends and family, but not when they ate with (presumably less familiar) co-workers (51).

306

### 307 *Gender*

308 One researcher-observed behavior study reported that females ate the same amount as  
309 males when in smaller groups (less than 3 people), but ate significantly less than males in  
310 larger groups (58). Consistent with that finding, a self-report study found a stronger  
311 correlation between meal size and the number of people present in male participants  
312 compared with female participants (54). However, experimental studies have reported no  
313 significant two-way interactions between gender and social context (23, 25, 28, 34).  
314 Notably, these experimental studies did not compare social facilitation of eating in male  
315 and female *friends*, and this may have obscured any gender differences.

316

317 Berry et al. (23) reported an interaction between food variety and social context that  
318 differed between male and female participants. Specifically, both males and females ate  
319 more in a group, relative to alone, when they were given one flavor of ice-cream.  
320 However, when given three flavors of ice-cream, social facilitation was only observed in  
321 female participants.

322

323 Two researcher-observed behavior studies reported an interaction between subjects'  
324 gender and the gender composition of the group. Specifically, Brindal et al. (55) found  
325 that males, but not females, ate more when eating in mixed-sex groups of 3 or more



326 people, compared with mixed-sex pairs. Similarly, Young et al. (59) found that, for  
327 female diners, calorie selection was negatively predicted by the number of males in a  
328 group, and positively predicted by the number of females in a group. In contrast, neither  
329 group size nor gender composition significantly predicted calorie selection in males. The  
330 degree of familiarity between co-eaters in these researcher-observed behavior studies was  
331 not reported (55,59).

332

### 333 *Dietary restraint/Weight status*

334 Two experimental studies examined social facilitation in high and low restrained eaters (30,  
335 31). Bellisle and colleagues found no overall social facilitation effect and this did not differ  
336 according to dietary restraint (30). Clendenen et al. (31) reported social facilitation of eating  
337 among familiar participants, but no moderation by dietary restraint. Similarly, a diary study  
338 found that the number of people present at a meal predicted food intake irrespective of dietary  
339 restraint (49). One study found that the strength of the social correlation did not differ  
340 significantly between those with high and low external eating scores (assessed using the  
341 Dutch Eating Behavior Questionnaire) (16).

342

343 Two researcher-observed behavior studies examined whether the effects of social context on  
344 food intake differed as a function of participants' weight status (56, 57). Krantz et al. (56)  
345 reported social facilitation effects only in non-overweight subjects, while overweight subjects  
346 eating alone selected more calories than did those eating with others. Maykovich (57)  
347 reported no effect of social context on the amount of food consumed in non-overweight  
348 individuals, while subjects with overweight or obesity ate less when with other people  
349 compared to alone. Salvy et al. (25) found that social facilitation effects were only evident in  
350 non-overweight children; overweight children ate more when eating alone compared with

351 when they ate with others. Contrary to these findings, one experimental study reported no  
352 effect of social context on eating behavior in normal weight and overweight male adolescents  
353 (27). Furthermore, Edelman (32) found that social facilitation effects on eating were not  
354 significantly moderated by weight status in male participants. However, the experimental  
355 studies described above examined food intake amongst strangers/acquaintances (25, 27, 32);  
356 to our knowledge, there has been no experimental examination of the moderating effect of  
357 weight status on social facilitation within groups of friends.

358

### 359 *Food type*

360 Several diary studies examined whether social facilitation is observed across various meal  
361 types. Three found greater social facilitation effects for foods high in fat and/or protein,  
362 and lower in carbohydrate (35, 39, 40), and one study (53) reported social facilitation  
363 effects across all food types (i.e. across foods high in fat, protein, and carbohydrates).  
364 Horgan et al. (41) found that meals consumed with others were more likely to contain  
365 meat than meals eaten alone. One experimental study also demonstrated an 18%  
366 increased intake when individuals ate with a friend compared with when they ate alone,  
367 and the social facilitation effect was particularly enhanced for high-fat sweet food (55%)  
368 (33). However, Clendenen et al. (31) found that participants eating in groups four friends  
369 did *not* consume more sweet or savory foods than those eating in groups of two. Several  
370 experimental studies found no evidence of social facilitation for foods high or low in fat  
371 and/or sugar (i.e. casserole, cake, fruit sherbets, pizza, cookies) (27, 28, 30, 34). The null  
372 effects obtained in these studies is likely due to the fact that they examined food intake  
373 amongst groups of strangers/acquaintances, and not friends.

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375

376 3.4.2.3. *The social correlation*

377 Diary studies have found small to moderate correlations between the number of people  
378 present at a meal and meal size in healthy adult populations (45, 16, 37, 39, 40, 42, 43,  
379 47, 48, 49, 50, 54). Heusel and de Castro (38) found a correlation between the number of  
380 people present and meal size, and reported that this was true for both healthy weight and  
381 underweight women.

382

383 De Castro et al. (3) reported a social correlation across both meals and snacks, and in  
384 meals consumed with and without alcohol. However, one study found that the social  
385 correlation was only evident for snacks and for meals eaten at breakfast; there was no  
386 social correlation for meals eaten at lunch and dinner (16). In a reanalysis of existing  
387 datasets, de Castro and Brewer (45) reported a non-linear relationship between meal size  
388 and the number of people present. Specifically, eating with one other person was  
389 associated with 28% larger meal size, relative to eating alone, while eating with 2, 3, 4, 5,  
390 and 6 or more people was associated with a 41%, 53%, 53%, 71%, and 76% increase in  
391 meal size, respectively.

392

393 One researcher-observed behavior study reported a greater number of dishes ordered as a  
394 function of increased group size (15). Cavazza et al. (15) also found that the number of dishes  
395 ordered in a mock restaurant could be predicted by the size of the group. This was moderated  
396 by trait self-monitoring (i.e. the degree to which one is motivated to act appropriately), such  
397 that social facilitation effects were only observed for those who scored high on this trait. In  
398 contrast, three researcher-observed behavior studies found no effect of group size on the  
399 energy content of foods selected (59) or eaten (55, 57). Klesges et al. (58) also reported that  
400 females ate less in larger, compared with smaller, groups. One experimental study reported no

401 effect of group size on intake; participants did not eat more in groups of four compared with  
402 pairs (31).

403 The social correlation has also been investigated in children. One-year-old infants  
404 demonstrated a weak correlation ( $r=.14$ ) between the number of people who were present  
405 during feeding and the amount they ate (36). Another study found that, after controlling for  
406 snack duration, children ate more when eating in groups of 9 compared with groups of 3 (24).  
407 There was also a group size by meal duration interaction such that, for children who ate for  
408 longer duration ( $>11.4$  minutes), those in larger groups ate 30% more than did those in  
409 smaller groups. For those children who ate for a shorter duration ( $<11.4$  minutes), there was  
410 no difference in the amounts eaten when groups of 3 and 9 children were compared (24).

#### 411 *3.4.2.4. Mechanisms*

##### 412 *Meal duration*

413 Several studies have examined whether social facilitation effects on eating are explained  
414 by a longer meal duration for those eating in groups, relative to those eating alone (or in  
415 larger groups relative to smaller groups). Using a diary approach, four studies reported  
416 positive correlations between group size, food intake, and meal duration (44, 45, 16, 51).  
417 Partially consistent with these findings, one researcher-observed behavior study found  
418 that food intake correlated positively with meal duration, but *not* with group size (55).  
419 Meal duration also significantly mediated the relationship between group size and food  
420 intake (16). In addition, Feunekes et al. (16) reported an indirect effect of group size on  
421 intake via participants' ratings of the atmosphere (rated on a 10-point scale from  
422 'unsociable' to 'sociable') *and* meal duration. Interestingly, one study found that the  
423 mechanisms by which social context facilitated intake differed between types of  
424 companions; specifically, eating with friends and eating with family members facilitated

425 intake via increased meal *duration* and faster eating *rate* (calories consumed per minute),  
426 respectively (51).

427

428 Experimental research has uncovered a relationship between meal duration, group size, and  
429 food intake. Specifically, Redd and de Castro (35) reported longer meal duration *and* larger  
430 meal sizes when participants ate with others, compared to when they ate alone. Furthermore,  
431 Clendenen et al. (31) found that participants eating in pairs took significantly longer to eat,  
432 and ate more, than did those eating alone and in groups of four (although the amount eaten  
433 did not significantly differ between those eating in pairs and groups of four). To directly  
434 examine the role of meal duration, one study limited meals to a shorter (12 minutes) or longer  
435 (36 minutes) duration when participants ate alone, in pairs, and in groups of four (34).  
436 Participants in the longer duration condition ate more than did those in the shorter duration  
437 condition, however food intake was not affected by social context.

438

439 While the majority of evidence supports the idea that longer meal duration plays an important  
440 role in the social facilitation of eating, findings from two experimental studies suggest that  
441 extended meal duration is neither necessary nor sufficient for the social facilitation of eating.  
442 One study found that, for those who ate for longer duration (i.e. > 11.4 minutes), children in  
443 groups of 9 consumed 30% more than did those who ate in groups of 3 (24). Furthermore,  
444 Hetherington et al. (33) found a longer meal duration when participants ate with friends and  
445 strangers, relative to alone, yet social facilitation effects were only observed when participants  
446 ate with friends.

447

448

449

450 *Distraction*

451 Four experimental studies compared the effects of social context and other forms of  
452 distracting activities on eating. Three reported increased intake when participants ate while  
453 watching TV or listening to a story or to music, relative to when they ate without distraction,  
454 but found no evidence for social facilitation (27, 28, 30). Notably, none of these studies  
455 examined eating when participants were with friends (instead, participants ate with  
456 strangers/acquaintances). In contrast, Hetherington et al. (33) found that participants  
457 consumed 18% more food when they ate with friends and 14% more food when they ate  
458 while watching TV relative to when they ate alone with no distraction. This increased intake  
459 also coincided with the extent that each activity distracted participants away from the lunch  
460 meal; participants spent significantly less time looking away from the lunch meal (indicative  
461 of less distraction) when eating alone, compared to when watching TV or eating with a friend.  
462 However, while eating with friends and strangers distracted participants' attention away from  
463 the food to the same degree, increased intake was only observed when participants ate with  
464 friends (33).

465

466 *Mood*

467 Several diary studies examined whether social facilitation effects were attributable to the  
468 effect of social context on mood. Three studies reported increased levels of elation and  
469 anxiety prior to and after eating with others, compared with eating alone (44, 51, 53),  
470 although there was no correlation between group size and an objective measure of arousal (i.e.  
471 heart rate) (53). Other findings suggest that levels of elation and anxiety cannot adequately  
472 account for the social facilitation of eating. Firstly, de Castro (44) found that differences in  
473 elation ratings between meals eaten alone and socially accounted for just 2% of the variance  
474 in meal size. Secondly, subjective mood ratings were not significant predictors of meal size

475 when entered into a multiple linear regression with group size (44, 53). Finally, de Castro (51)  
476 reported greater social facilitation when participants ate with friends or spouses, compared to  
477 when they ate with co-workers, despite the fact that eating with co-workers was associated  
478 with greater levels anxiety and elation.

479

#### 480 *Norms of appropriate intake*

481 One study examined whether the effects of social context on food intake was due to  
482 normative influences (52). Using an Ecological Momentary Assessment task, Schüz et al.  
483 (52) reported that the relationship between social context and snack intake was mediated  
484 by the extent to which participants perceived eating to be ‘encouraged’ and ‘appropriate’.  
485 Across two studies, Cavazza et al. (15) reported that people ordered more food as a  
486 function of group size, and that the number of dishes ordered by each individual in a  
487 group corresponded highly with the number of dishes ordered by others in the group. This  
488 finding provides further evidence for the role of norms as a potential mechanism behind  
489 the social facilitation of eating. In their normative perspective of social eating, Herman  
490 and colleagues (60) suggest that individuals eating socially generally try to eat as much as  
491 possible, without being seen to be eating excessively; that is, they attempt to eat no more  
492 than the largest eater in the group. This may lead to positive feedback whereby the larger  
493 norm set by one individual ‘permits’ greater intake of another, and vice-versa. This is  
494 consistent with the idea that social eating provides a ‘license’ to indulge (60).

#### 495 *Food palatability/appetite*

496 One diary study found that the palatability of the meal was associated with the size and  
497 gender composition of a group. Specifically, male and female participants rated meals eaten  
498 with one female as more palatable than meals eaten with many females, while the number of  
499 males was not related to palatability ratings (54). However, Feunekes (16) found that food

500 palatability did not mediate the relationship between group size and intake. No studies have  
501 examined whether social context moderates changes in appetite during the course of a meal,  
502 although McAlpine et al. (29) found that when participants ate alone or with others their pre-  
503 and post-meal ratings of hunger, fullness, and desire to eat changed to the same extent. This  
504 was despite the fact that those who ate in groups consumed 60% more calories than did those  
505 who ate alone.

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## 4. Discussion

We found strong evidence that people eat more food when eating with familiar others compared with when they eat alone. Social facilitation was not observed across studies that had examined eating amongst groups of strangers or acquaintances. The effect of social facilitation on food intake (when eating with friends) ( $d=.76$ ) is considerably larger than that of portion size ( $d=.45$ ) (61), and is similar to the large effect reported for modelling of eating ( $d=.85$ ) (62). We find that evidence for the ‘social correlation’ is weak and that the available evidence provides limited insight into the mechanisms underlying the social facilitation of eating.

### 4.1. Moderators of social facilitation effects

The majority of experimental studies we reviewed recruited groups of strangers/acquaintances, and across these studies there was no significant facilitation of eating. However, a significant social facilitation effect was observed across four studies that tested groups of familiar others, and the size of this effect was large ( $d=.76$ ). In addition, social facilitation of eating was observed consistently across diary studies, which may be due to the fact that the majority of self-selected dining groups likely comprise friends and family. The moderating effect of co-eater familiarity has been alluded to in previous reviews (7; 60) but here we provide the first quantitative evidence for such moderation. It remains unclear whether social facilitation effects on eating are more pronounced in very close friends relative to less close friends, and so this may be an avenue for future research.

We also found some evidence that social facilitation effects are attenuated when women eat in groups that include men (55, 59) and people with overweight/obesity eat with lean people (19, 21, 25, 56, 57). These effects are likely explained by impression management concerns. People are motivated to convey positive impressions to strangers (63, 64) and selecting small portions may provide a means of doing so (6, 62, 65, 66). Impression management concerns

532 are likely to be particularly pronounced for women who are eating with men whom they wish  
533 to impress and for people with obesity who are eating with lean dining companions and who  
534 wish to avoid negative judgments related to perceptions of overeating (63).

535

536 Social context may specifically facilitate intake of indulgent foods (33, 35, 39) but the  
537 moderating effect of food type on social facilitation has not been assessed directly. In  
538 addition, De Castro et al. (3) reported social facilitation effects across all meal types, but  
539 Feunekes et al. (16) found that the positive correlation between group size and meal size was  
540 only significant for meals eaten at breakfast and snacks. Further research is required to  
541 establish the robustness of social facilitation effects with different food types and meals.

#### 542 **4.2. The social correlation**

543 Evidence from diary studies suggests a positive correlation between the number of people  
544 present and the amount consumed by an individual in that group, but only up to about six  
545 people, after which no further increase is observed (45). On the other hand, evidence from  
546 researcher-observed behavioral studies and experimental studies is more mixed: some  
547 studies find a positive social correlation (15), while others report no effect (31, 55, 58,  
548 59). At present, there is not sufficient data to be able to determine how factors such as the  
549 degree of acquaintance of the group members may influence the social correlation. It is  
550 possible that when a group includes even one member who is less well known to other  
551 group members, impression management concerns are heightened, and the size of the  
552 social correlation is reduced.

#### 553 **4.3. Mediators of the social facilitation of eating**

554 Only two studies have formally examined the mechanisms behind social facilitation using  
555 mediation analyses (16, 52). The results suggest that social facilitation can be partly explained

556 by longer meal duration (16) and perceptions about the ‘appropriateness’ of eating (52).  
557 However, longer meal duration has been found to be neither necessary nor sufficient for  
558 social facilitation (33). Another possibility that has yet to be tested is that social context  
559 affects eating via its effects on hunger/food palatability. Ogden et al. (12) found a *positive*  
560 relationship between the amount consumed in a social situation and post-meal ratings of  
561 hunger, but this study examined intake while participants talked with the researcher (i.e. there  
562 was no co-eater). There is evidence that eating in company enhances food palatability (18, 22,  
563 54), but this is yet to be examined as a mediating mechanism of social facilitation.

#### 564 **4.4. Gaps in knowledge and a framework for future research**

565 In order to be able to fully investigate the moderators and mediators of the social  
566 facilitation of eating, it will be necessary to minimize the effects of impression  
567 management concerns and to conduct studies on participants who are well known to each  
568 other.

569 Previous research has tended to focus on the effect of social context on *immediate* food intake  
570 and the effects on longer term intake have yet to be thoroughly investigated. Diary studies  
571 have found no correlation between the number of people present at a meal and food intake at  
572 a subsequent meal, suggesting that people do not reduce their food intake after consuming a  
573 large meal socially (40, 45). However, using survey methods, a recent study found a  
574 significant positive correlation between social meal frequency and energy intake for female,  
575 but not male, participants (67). Clearly, this issue deserves further investigation because  
576 uncompensated social facilitation of eating could play a role in promoting chronic overeating  
577 and obesity.

578 There are several other mechanisms that might promote food sharing and explain why  
579 people eat more in groups than they do alone. Eating with others may be more enjoyable,

580 and the enhanced reward from social eating might serve to increase consumption.  
581 Alternatively, social norms might license overeating in company but sanction it when  
582 eating alone, and they might encourage greater food sharing because social eating  
583 provides an opportunity to consume a larger meal (60). Food sharing might also be  
584 promoted if the act of providing food becomes associated with praise and recognition  
585 from the social group, thereby strengthening social bonds. Indeed, larger quantities of  
586 food are often anticipated and made available (per capita) even before a meal begins (15),  
587 a phenomenon referred to as the social ‘precilitation’ of intake (6).

588 Finally, and in relation to our question about *why* social facilitation occurs, it may be  
589 helpful to dissociate different levels of explanation. Behavioral ecologists sometimes  
590 draw a distinction between ‘why’ and ‘how’. ‘Ultimate explanations’ consider *why* a  
591 behavior confers an adaptive advantage, whereas ‘proximate explanations’ refer to *how*  
592 this benefit might be realized (68). For example, omnivores will seek to reduce foraging  
593 costs because (why) this reduces the risk of predation. However, the ability to do so (how)  
594 is governed by a tendency to find energy-rich food especially rewarding (69). In this  
595 review we have focused on plausible proximate mechanisms. However, the underlying  
596 (ultimate) reason(s) why social facilitation occurs is rarely considered. As with many  
597 other species, humans tend to share a common food resource. However, in humans this is  
598 especially true, and many have suggested that hunter gatherers even adopt(ed) an ‘active’  
599 egalitarian approach to resource distribution (70). Active food sharing probably confers a  
600 broader benefit because it protects against periods of food insecurity. A person’s day-to-  
601 day foraging success is likely to be variable. However, when spread across a group this  
602 risk is reduced, and on occasions when a large animal is killed, and when more meat is  
603 available than can be consumed by a single individual, it can be distributed before it  
604 spoils. Accordingly, in modern hunter-gatherers, meat is not available every day and food

605 sharing is ubiquitous (70), probably because the cost of sharing is low relative to the  
606 benefit from receiving meat from others.

607 Why then does social facilitation promote an *increase* in food consumption relative to  
608 solo eating? First, it is perhaps important to note that the same process has been observed  
609 in numerous other species; including; chickens (71,72), rats (73), and gerbils (74). Since  
610 social facilitation is conserved across so many species this suggests it serves an ultimate  
611 purpose. Although inclusive fitness may be enhanced by strong social collaboration,  
612 individuals also compete for resource. Eating more than others is likely to lead to  
613 ostracism, which, in turn, reduces food security. Therefore, a tension is created between  
614 ‘being seen’ to engage in altruistic sharing and procuring maximum personal resource.  
615 We suggest that when eating socially, a simple solution might be to consume at least as  
616 much as others in the group. Hence, social facilitation might occur because individual  
617 group members are guided to match their behavior to others, promoting a larger meal than  
618 might otherwise be eaten in the absence of this ‘social competition’. Although a single  
619 meal will have a trivial impact on energy reserves (75), a chronic failure to adopt this  
620 strategy (or similar) might have a serious impact on relative fitness. In this way, social  
621 facilitation can be viewed as a natural byproduct of social food sharing - a strategy that  
622 would have served a critical function in our ancestral environments. The suggestion that  
623 social facilitation occurs in response to food sharing also explains why it is confined to  
624 individuals who are familiar with each other: food sharing relies on a long-standing  
625 reciprocal exchange of food supplies, which is unlikely to occur with strangers.

626 Of course, most humans are no longer hunter gatherers. Nevertheless, proximate  
627 mechanisms that once served efficient foraging continue to guide our dietary behavior  
628 (for a review see 76). Indeed, the recent and rapid transition to a dietary landscape in  
629 which food is abundant has created forms of ‘evolutionary mismatch’, whereby these

630 inherited foraging strategies no longer serve their ultimate purpose. In the case of social  
631 facilitation, we have inherited a mechanism that ensured equitable food distribution but  
632 which now exerts a powerful influence on unhealthy dietary intakes.

#### 633 **4.5. Theoretical and practical implications of research on the social facilitation of eating**

634 Traditionally, social influences on eating have been conceptualized as an independent  
635 influence on appetite, separate from the fundamental motivational processes that underpin  
636 the control of food choices. However, more recent theorizing on appetite control suggests  
637 that social and motivational influences on eating are part of an integrated system in which  
638 decisions about what and how much to eat are informed by representations of the value of  
639 a particular food item at any one moment and that these representations of value are  
640 influenced by beliefs about the nutritional value of foods and many other factors  
641 including cultural and social factors (e.g. 77, 78). This theory can be tested by  
642 investigating whether eating with others increases amounts consumed via enhancement of  
643 the value assigned to food in that context.

644

645 If it turns out that eating socially is a driver of positive energy balance, then this will raise  
646 questions about whether avoidance of social eating situations should be recommended for  
647 weight control. Social eating is generally considered positive because it may contribute to  
648 better interpersonal relations and enhanced well-being. For example, research on family meals  
649 suggests that regular eating in a family group is positively associated with well-being (e.g.  
650 79). Furthermore, solo eating is often viewed negatively and people report that they would  
651 prefer not to do so (80, 81). Hence, advice to eat alone may be neither desirable nor  
652 acceptable. An alternative approach would be to suggest strategies that might mitigate

653 overeating so that people can experience the benefits of social eating while avoiding potential  
654 effects on weight gain.

#### 655 **4.6. Conclusions**

656 We present the first systematic review and meta-analysis of the social facilitation of eating.  
657 Our results suggest that eating with familiar others has a powerful effect to increase food  
658 intake relative to eating alone. However, further work is required to assess the moderators and  
659 mediators of this effect and the contribution of social eating to positive energy balance. Such  
660 research will have important implications for the development of weight management  
661 strategies. We argue that future research on the social facilitation of intake might be  
662 usefully guided by our new framework, which proposes that social facilitation of eating has  
663 evolved as a strategy that ensures procurement of maximum personal food intake in the  
664 context of food sharing.

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670 **Authors' contributions:**

671 HR, JB, LV, and SH designed the research. HR conducted the research and analyzed data.

672 HR, JB, LV, and SH wrote the paper. SH had primary responsibility for final content.

673 All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Table 1. *Study information and methods of selected studies grouped by study design*

| Authors (year)              | N                        | Participant age (M=mean) | Participant BMI (M=Mean) or weight status (NW=Normal weight; OW=Overweight) | Participant gender (M=male; F=female) | Design  | Primary outcome variable(s)   | Evidence of social facilitation (SF)? | Moderators/mechanisms examined   |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|---|---|---------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Experimental studies</b> |                          |                          |   |                                       |   |   |                                       |  |
| Bellisle (30)               | 40                       | M=26                     | M=22  | F                                     | 1) eating alone 2) Eating in groups of 3 (unacquainted) 3) listening to detective story 4) Watching TV (no food cues) 5) Watching TV (food adverts)                     | Amount (g) eaten of main meal and dessert (casserole and fruit sherberts) | No                                    | No moderating effect of dietary restraint.   |
| Berry (23)                  | 126                      | Not reported             | Not reported  | M (n=65) + F (n=61)                   | 1) Eating alone + 1 flavor ice-cream 2) Eating alone + 3 flavors of ice cream 3) Eating with others + 1 flavor ice-cream 4) Eating with others + 3 flavors of ice-cream | Amount eaten (ice cream)  | Yes                                   | SF observed in both M+F given 1 flavor of ice-cream. SF only observed for F, not M, in p's given 3 flavors of ice-cream.   |
| Cavazza (study 2) (15)      | 255                      | M=30                     | Not reported  | M (n=142) + F (n=113)                 | 1) 1 other person, 2) 2 other people 3) 3 other people 4) 4 other people.   | Number of dishes selected   | Yes                                   | SF only observed in people who scored high on a measure of self-monitoring.  |
| Clendenen (31)              | 120                      | M=22                     | M=21  | F                                     | 1) Alone 2) in pairs (friends) 3) in pairs (strangers) 4) in groups of 4 (friends) 5) in groups of 4 (strangers)  | Amount eaten (deli foods and cookies)                                     | Yes                                   | No moderating effect of familiarity on effect of group size on food intake (excluding 'alone' condition).<br>No moderating effect of dietary restraint.<br>Those eating in pairs and fours ate for longer than those eating alone. |
| Edelman (32)                | 53 (46 used in analysis) | M=34                     | 25 OW (>15% height/weight norms; 21 NW (<10% height/weight norms)           | M                                     | 1) Alone 2) Eating in groups of 4 or 5  | Amount eaten (lasagna)  | Yes                                   | Moderating effect of weight status did not reach significance.   |

|                       |    |       |   |                        |  |  |                                     |  |
|-----------------------|----|-------|---|------------------------|--|--|-------------------------------------|--|
| Hetherington (33)     | 37 | M=28  | M=24                                    | M (n=21) +<br>F (n=16) | 1) Solo eating, 2) Eating while watching TV 3) Eating with strangers (2 others) 4) eating with friends (2 others). | Amount eaten (buffet lunch). Meal duration. Amount of time spent attending to and looking away from food.        | Yes                                 | Familiarity: SF observed when participants ate with friends, not strangers. Food type: SF specifically for high-fat/sweet food. Eating with friends and strangers significantly increased meal duration and time spent looking away from the food, relative to eating alone. |
| Lumeng & Hillman (24) | 54 | M=4   | Not reported                            | M(n=37) +<br>F(n=17)   | 1) Eating in small groups (3 children) 2) eating in large groups (9 children)                                      | Amount eaten (crackers)  | Yes – controlling for meal duration | No difference in meal duration between large and small groups  |
| McAlpine (29)         | 21 | M=68  | M=27                                    | M(n=2) +<br>F(n=19)    | 1) eating alone 2) eating with 2 friends   | Amount consumed (weight and energy intake) from snacks (sip feed, crisps, cereal bar, chocolate, beer, crackers) | Yes                                 | Changes in hunger, fullness, and desire to eat ratings, prior to and after a meal, were similar in 'alone' and 'with friends' conditions.  |
| Mekhmoukh (27)        | 38 | M=16  | Normal weight (M=21; Overweight (M=29). | M                      | 1) Eating alone 2) Eating in groups of 3 3) Watching TV 4) Listening to music                                      | Energy intake from food (casserole, chocolate brownies) and drinks (soda, water, juice)                          | No                                  | No moderating effect of weight status  |
| Peneau (28)           | 29 | 15-16 | M=21                                    | M (n=14)+<br>F(n=15)   | 1) Watching TV 2) Listening to music 3) Eating alone 4) Eating in groups of 3                                      | Energy intake from food (casserole and cake) and drinks (water, soda, juice)                                     | No                                  | No moderating effect of gender.  |

|                       |     |      |              |                      |  |                                  |  |  |
|-----------------------|-----|------|--------------|----------------------|--|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Pliner (34)           | 132 | M=41 | M=26         | M(n=70)+<br>F(n=62)  | 1) male/12 min/alone 2) male/36 min/alone 3) female/12 min/alone 4) female/36 min/alone 5) male/12 min/2 people 6) male/36 min/2 people 7) female/12 min/2 people 8) female/36 min/2 people, 9) male/12min/4 people 10) male/36min/4 people 11)female/12 min/4 people 12)female/36min/4 people | Amount eaten (pizza and cookies) | No   | No moderating effect of gender. Participants ate more in longer meals, relative to shorter meals, regardless of group size.  |
| Redd & de Castro (35) | 30  | M=23 | Not reported | M(n=10) +<br>F(n=20) | Over 5-day periods, participants instructed to a) eat as they normally would b) eat exclusively alone, and c) to eat only with others present. Participants recorded their food intake.  | Self-reported food intake        | Yes  | Meal type: Fat intake higher in normal vs. alone condition. Within normal condition, fat intake was higher when participants ate with others, relative to when they ate alone. |
| Salvy (25)            | 32  | M=8  | 15 NW; 17 OW | M(n=16) +<br>F(n=16) | 1) Overweight/alone 2) overweight/in groups of 4 3) normal weight/alone 4) normal weight/in groups of 4  | Amount eaten (pizza)             | Yes – only for non-overweight participants.    | Weight status: Social facilitation observed in non-overweight, and not in overweight, children. No moderating effect of gender.  |
| Salvy (26)            | 44  | M=7  | NW only      | M(n=20) +<br>F(n=24) | 1) alone 2) with sibling 3) with unfamiliar child  | Amount eaten (cookies)           | Yes – only for children who ate with siblings. | Familiarity: Social facilitation only observed in children eating with siblings, not strangers.  |

## Non-experimental: Diary studies

|                      |    |      |      |                      |  |  |     |  |
|----------------------|----|------|------|----------------------|--|--|-----|--|
| Bellisle et al. (54) | 26 | M=23 | M=20 | M(n=10) +<br>F(n=16) | For seven days, participants recorded amount eaten and the number of people present at each meal. Levels of hunger and fullness were also recorded before and after each meal. | Calories consumed at each meal (self-reported) and number of people present. | Yes | Stronger correlation between meal size and number of people present in males, relative to females. The authors do not state whether this difference was significant. |
|----------------------|----|------|------|----------------------|--|--|-----|--|

|                |     |   |              |                          |                            |   |     |  |
|----------------|-----|---|--------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|---|-----|--|
| de Castro (3)  | 78  | M=32  | Not reported | M(n=21) +<br>F(n=57)     | Reanalyzed diary datasets  | Self-reported meal size, number of people present, whether the record was a meal or snack, eaten with or without alcohol, and eaten at home, in a restaurant, or elsewhere. | Yes | Social facilitation was reported across all meals (breakfast, lunch, dinner) and snacks, eaten at all locations, and consumed with and without alcohol.  |
| de Castro (44) | 82  | M=32  | M=23         | M(n=23) +<br>F(n=59)     | Reanalyzed diary datasets. | Self-reported meal size, number of people present, meal duration, eating rate, subjective ratings of elation and anxiety.   | Yes | Eating rate was unrelated to number of people present. Meal duration was predicted by group size and was associated with the amount eaten. Elation ratings did not predict meal size when controlling for number of people present.  |
| de Castro (47) | 762 | Age range: 20-34(n=325)<br>35-49(n=292)<br>40-64(n=99)<br>65+ (n=46). | M=25         | M (n=348)+<br>F (n=414)  | Reanalyzed diary datasets  | Self-reported meal size (kcal), the number of people present.   | Yes | Social correlation did not differ between age groups.  |
| de Castro (48) | 315 | M=32  | M=23         | M (n=121) +<br>F (n=194) | Reanalyzed diary datasets  | Self-reported meal size (kcal), number of people present, and whether the meal was eaten at the weekend or during the week.   | Yes | Social correlation greater for meals consumed at weekends, compared with weekdays.   |
| de Castro (51) | 515 | M=42  | M=25         | M(n=276) +<br>F(n=239)   | Reanalyzed diary datasets  | Self-reported meal size, number of people present, type of companion (friend, family, spouse, co-worker, or other), subjective ratings of elation and anxiety.              | Yes | Meals eaten with family/spouse were larger and faster, and meals eaten with friends were larger and of longer duration, compared with meals eaten with others. Anxiety/elation ratings were higher in meals eaten with other people than meals eaten alone. Participant gender x companion gender interaction: females ate more when eating with male companions, than with females. Males unaffected by companion's gender. |

|                           |  |                                  |                                   |  |   |   |     |   |
|---------------------------|--|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|---|-----|---|
| de Castro (49)            | 358  | M=44                             | M=26                              | M(n=201) +<br>F(n=157)   | Reanalyzed diary datasets   | Self-reported meal size, dietary restraint (assessed using TFEQ). | Yes | Social facilitation was not moderated by dietary restraint.   |
| de Castro (43)            | 216 (26 French; 140 American; 50 Dutch)  | M=23                             | M=22                              | M (n=68) +<br>F(n=148)   | For seven days, participants recorded amount eaten, and the number of people (males and females) present at each meal. Hunger ratings were also recorded before and after each meal.  | Self-reported meal size   | Yes | Correlation between meal size and number of people present similar across all three nationalities (i.e. French, Dutch, American).     |
| de Castro (42)            | 84 (56 with type-1 diabetes, and 28 healthy controls)  | Diabetics: M=53<br>Healthy: M=49 | Diabetics: M=25;<br>Healthy: M=23 | M (n=30 with diabetes; n=5 controls) + F (n=26 with diabetes; n=23 controls) | For seven days, participants recorded amount eaten, and the number of people (males and females) present at each meal. Mood and appetite ratings were also recorded before and after each meal, and participants rated the palatability of each meal. | Self-reported meal size   | Yes | Social correlation did not differ between diabetic and control participants.  |
| de Castro (50)            | 265 twin pairs (110 identical twins; 102 fraternal same-sex twins; 53 fraternal mixed-sex twins) | M=40                             | M=25                              | M+F  | Reanalyzed diary datasets: Self-report data originally collected from 110 identical twins and 102 non-identical (same-sex) twins. An additional 53 mixed-sex twins were recruited for this study.   | Self-reported meal size.  | Yes | Genetic influences explained 30% of the difference in regression slopes between the number of people present at a meal and meal size. |
| de Castro & de Castro(40) | 63   | M=34                             | Not reported                      | M (n=14) +<br>F(n=49)  | For seven days, participants recorded amount eaten, and the number of people present at each meal. Levels of hunger were also recorded prior to each meal.  | Self-reported meal size.  | Yes | Meals eaten alone had higher proportion of carbohydrates, and lower proportion of fat, than meals eaten with other people.            |
| de Castro & Brewer (45)   | 153  | M=34                             | Not reported                      | M(n=49) +<br>F(n=104)  | Reanalyzed diary datasets   | Self-reported meal size.  | Yes |   |

|                         |  |  |                             |                     |   |   |     |  |
|-------------------------|--|--|-----------------------------|---------------------|---|---|-----|--|
| de Castro & Taylor (46) | 650 (99 smokers; 551 non-smokers)                              | M=38   | M=25                        | M(n=288) + F(n=362) | Reanalyzed diary datasets   | Self-reported meal size, number of people present, smoking status.  | Yes | Social facilitation effect stronger in smokers compared with non-smokers.  |
| Elmore & de Castro (37) | 52 (19 untreated bulimics; 12 recovered bulimics; 21 controls) | Untreated bulimics: M=22; Recovered bulimics: M=26; Normal eaters: M=26. | Not reported                | F                   | For seven days, participants recorded everything that they ate and drank, and the number of people present at each meal.  | Calories consumed at each meal (self-reported) and number of people present   | Yes | Social correlation was stronger in healthy controls, compared with those with untreated and recovered bulimia.   |
| Feunekes (study 1) (16) | 30   | M=22   | M=22                        | M (n=15) + F(n=15)  | Participants recorded food consumption, meal duration, no. of others present, relationship to co-eaters, and atmosphere (sociability). Records made over 4 days.  | Calories consumed at each meal (self-reported), number of people present, meal duration, and atmosphere.  | Yes | Social correlation only observed for meals eaten at breakfast time.  |
| Feunekes (study 2) (16) | 20   | M=23   | M=22                        | M(n=10) + F(n=10)   | Participants recorded food consumed, meal duration, no. of others present, atmosphere (sociability), relationship to co-eaters, and amount intended to eat (small to large amount on 10 point scale). Records made over 7 days.                 | Calories consumed at each meal (self-reported), number of people present, meal duration, atmosphere, amount intended to eat prior to meal occasion. | Yes | Social correlation only observed for snacks.<br><br>Across studies 1 and 2, the social correlation was not moderated by external eating score. Meal duration mediated the relationship between group size and food intake. |
| Heusel & de Castro (38) | 99 (33 underweight; 66 normal weight)                          | Underweight: M=26; Control group 1=35; Control 2=28                      | Underweight: M=19; NW: M=24 | F                   | For seven days, participants recorded everything they ate and drank, and the number of people present at each meal. They also reported the time of each meal, and their pre-and post-meal ratings of hunger, fullness, depression, and anxiety. | Calories consumed at each meal (self-reported)  | Yes | No moderating effect of weight status.   |

|                          |      |             |   |                   |  |   |     |  |
|--------------------------|------|-------------|---|-------------------|--|---|-----|--|
| Horgan (41)              | 4156 | M=50 years  | Not reported  | M+F               | For four days, participants recorded everything they ate and drank, as well as the time it was eaten, where it was eaten, and who they were eating with.   | Calories and meat (g) consumption at each meal                                      | Yes |  |
| Patel & Schlundt (39)    | 78   | M=37        | M=32  | F                 | Participants recorded everything that they ate, and whether other people were present. Participants also recorded their mood at each eating episode. Records were taken over 2 weeks.  | Calories consumed at each meal (self-reported), mood, and number of people present. | Yes | No interaction between mood state and social context on intake. Meals eaten socially contained more calories from fat and protein, and less calories from carbohydrates, than meals eaten alone. |
| Pearcey & de Castro (36) | 29   | M=13 months | 19 infants fell between 5 <sup>th</sup> and 95 <sup>th</sup> percentiles for height and weight for age. | M(n=18) + F(n=11) | Parents recorded everything the infants ate, the number of people present and their relation to the infant, and the beginning and end time of the eating episode.  | Calories consumed at each meal (self-reported) and the number of people present,    | Yes |  |
| Schüz (52)               | 61   | M=32        | M=25  | M(n=19) + F(n=42) | Ecological Momentary Assessment task. At randomly timed prompts, and after every time they consumed a snack, participants recorded whether or not there was anyone in their presence who were also eating. Participants also recorded the extent to which they felt that others approved and encouraged them to eat at that moment (i.e. inductive norms). Participants completed the task over 14 days. | Probability of snack consumption vs. random prompt.                                 | Yes | The effect of others eating on snack intake was partially mediated by the perceived approval/encouragement of eating.  |

|   |      |   |                                  |                       |  |  |     |  |
|---|------|---|----------------------------------|-----------------------|--|--|-----|--|
| Stroebele & de Castro (53)                            | 133  | M=21  | M=25                             | M(n=29) +<br>F(n=104) | Over seven days, participants recorded everything that they consumed, the number of people present at each meal. Subjective ratings of arousal (i.e. elation and excitement) were also recorded, and physiological arousal was recorded in a subset of participants using heart rate monitors. | Calories consumed at each meal (self-reported), the number of people present, and subjective and objective measures of excitement and elation. | Yes | Social facilitation found for intake of protein, fat, and carbohydrate. Social facilitation was not mediated by ratings of excitement / elation.   |
| <b>Non-experimental: Researcher-observed behavior</b> |      |   |                                  |                       |  |  |     |  |
| Brindal (55)  | 157  | 83.4% rated 15-25; 7.6% rated 26-35; 4.5% rated 36+           | 82% rated 'not overweight/obese' | M (n=86) +<br>F(n=71) | Subjects observed eating in a fast-food restaurant. Subjects ate in pairs (67.5%), or groups of 3 (19.7%), four (9.6%) or five or more (3.4%). Lone diners were not observed.  | Foods eaten, meal duration, and the number of others present.  | No  | Group size x participant gender x group composition interaction. M in mixed sex groups ate more than M in mixed-sex pairs. F in same-sex groups ate more than those in mixed-sex groups.<br><br>Amount eaten correlated with meal duration but not group size. |
| Cavazza (study 1) (15)                                | 1685 | Not reported. Excluded children who appeared younger than 13. | Not reported                     | M(n=793)+<br>F(n=892) | Subjects observed eating in an Italian restaurant. Subjects ate alone (n=22), in pairs (n=259), or in groups of between 3-30 people (n=228).   | Mean number of dishes ordered; mean number of plates with leftovers; average bread and wine consumption  | Yes |  |

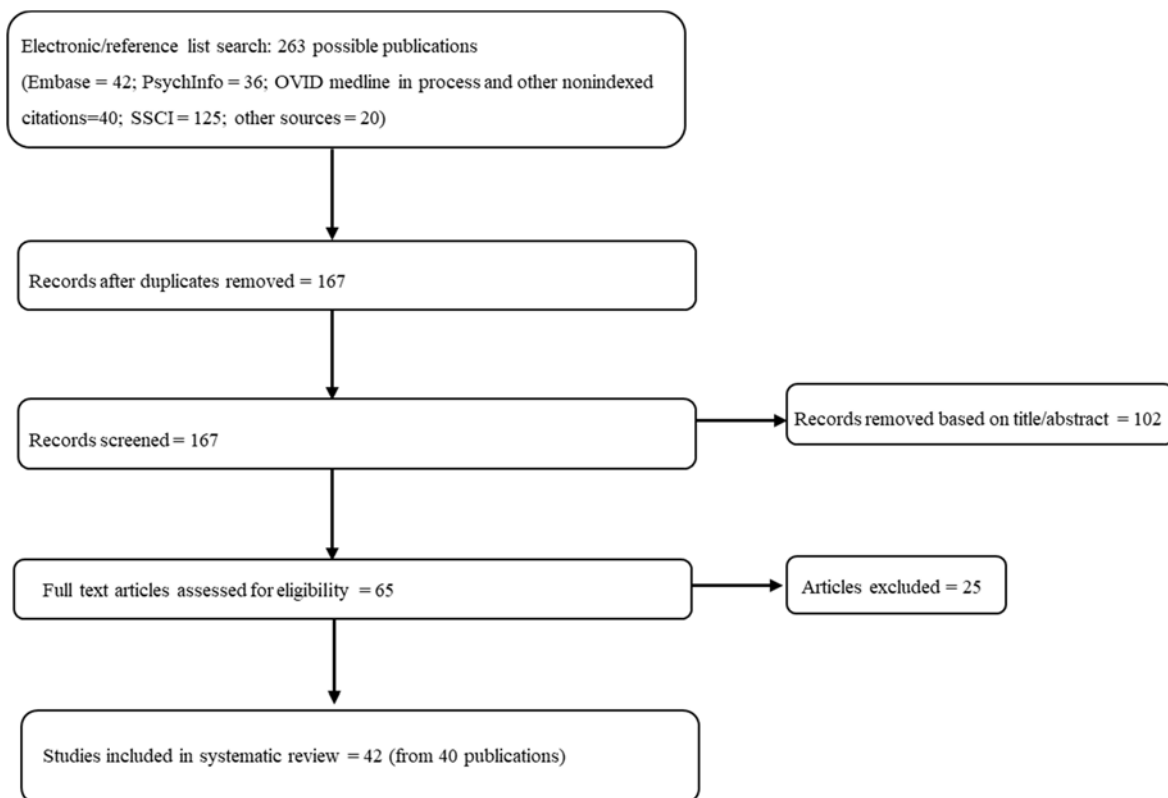


|                |     |                            |                               |                        |  |   |  |  |
|----------------|-----|----------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|--|---|--|--|
| Klesges (58)   | 539 | Not reported               | Not reported                  | M(n=294) +<br>F(n=245) | Subjects observed eating in 7 fast-food and 7 formal-dining restaurants. Observers recorded whether subjects ate alone, or in a small (1-3 people) or large (3+ people) group, and the gender composition of each group (i.e. mixed-sex / same-sex). Observers also recorded whether each subject was overweight or normal-weight. | Calories consumed                           | Yes                                    | Moderating effect of gender. F ate the same as M in small groups, but less than M in large groups.   |
| Krantz (56)    | 197 | Estimated median = 27 - 28 | 101 rated obese; 96 rated NW. | M(n=106)+<br>F(n=91)   | Students and staff observed eating at a University cafeteria at lunch time. Observers coded participants' gender, and whether or not they ate alone (n=76) or with others (n=121).   | Calorie content and number of items chosen. | Yes – only in non-overweight subjects. | Moderating effect of weight status - only non-overweight subjects showed SF. OW individuals ate more when alone, than with others.   |
| Maykovich (57) | 553 | 30-50 years                | 15% obese; 16% OW.            | M + F                  | Observations conducted across 20 restaurants in a large city in N. America.  | Amount eaten                                | No                                     | Overweight and obese individuals ate less when with others than when alone. For normal weight individuals, there was no difference in the amount eaten by those who ate alone vs. those who ate with other people. |
| Young (59)     | 469 | Not reported               | not reported                  | M(n=210) +<br>F(n=259) | Subjects observed eating at three University cafeterias. Subjects ate alone (n=37), in pairs (n=188), or in groups of three (n=117), four (n=80), five (n=35), or six (n=12).  | Calorie content of foods selected.          | No                                     | Moderating effect of gender. For F, the number of M in the group negatively predicted intake, & the number of F positively predicted intake. Number of M or F did not predict intake for M.                        |

## Legends for Figures

**Figure 1.** PRISMA search and inclusion flow chart.

**Figure 2.** Forest plot for experimental studies comparing food intake when participants ate alone and/or in groups.



**Figure 1.**

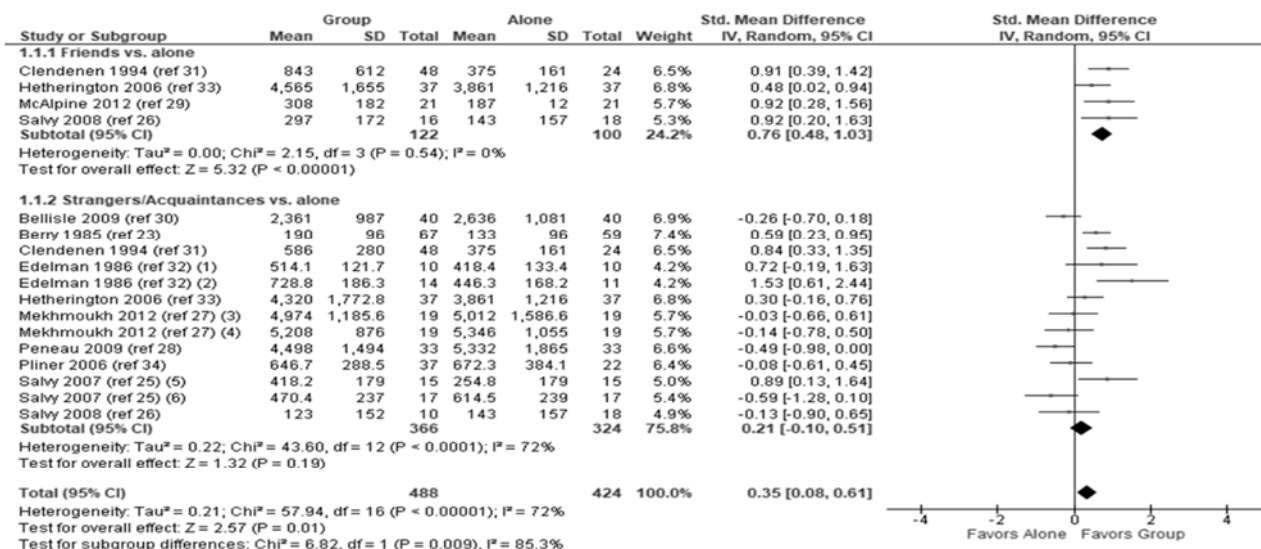


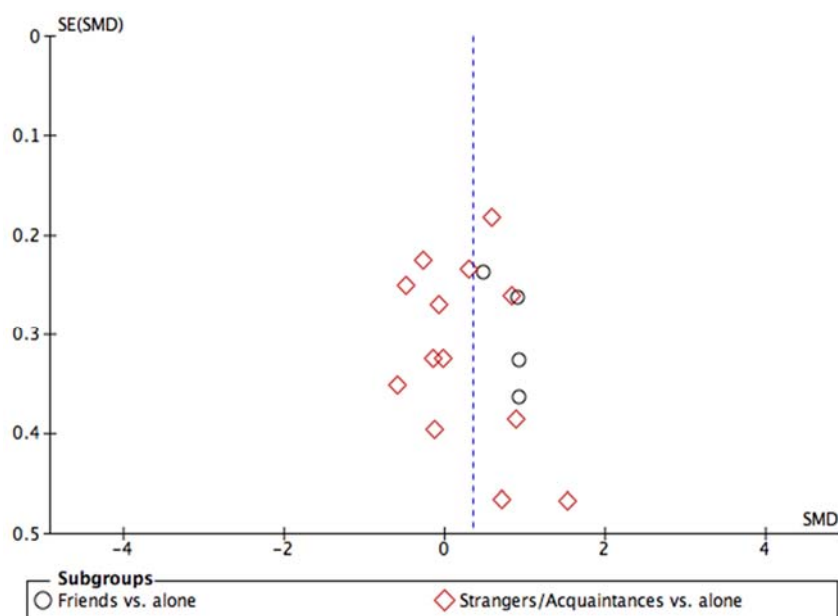
Figure 2.

Notes. Total refers to the number of participants. Studies are grouped based on whether participants ate with friends or with strangers/acquaintances. SD=standard deviation; IV=independent variable; OW=overweight participants; NW=normal weight participants. 1= NW male adults; 2= OW male adults; 3=NW male adolescents; 4=OW male adolescents; 5= NW male and female children; 6=OW male and female children.

## Supplementary

### A systematic review and meta-analysis of the social facilitation of eating

Helen K. Ruddock, Jeffrey M. Brunstrom, Lenny R. Vartanian, & Suzanne Higgs



*Supplementary Figure 1.* Funnel plot of effect sizes from experimental studies examining social facilitation effects