Food and Gender: How do our Eating Habits Portray our Masculine or Feminine Behaviors?

Alaine Vescovo

SUNY Oswego
Abstract

In contemporary American Society, food and gender relate to each other in various ways. This paper demonstrates how masculinity and femininity are portrayed through food choices and eating habits as a result of body image and how they want to be seen by others. By using Goffman’s Performance Theory and observing people over the age of eighteen in restaurants, coffee shops and at an intimate holiday dinner, there have been conclusions made about how women and men differ in the way they eat and what they choose to eat based on how they feel about themselves. Observations have also been made about what they want to portray to their peers and those around them. This paper reveals which foods are particularly associated with masculinity and femininity, how women and men perform their gender through food habits and how gender behavior is developed through eating habits.
Food and Gender: How do our Eating Habits Portray our Masculine or Feminine Behavior?

This paper examines how an individual will demonstrate their masculinity or femininity to others based on their food choices and eating habits. Using Goffman’s Performance Theory, I have chosen to observe men and women who are eighteen and older in different types of locations where they are eating in a social environment. In his book, *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) examines the way in which a person in ordinary work situations presents himself or herself and their activity to others, the ways in which they guide and control the impressions formed of them and the kinds of things they may or may not do while sustaining their performance before them. The self-presentation concept, also known as impression management, implies how every individual performs a certain role while appearing in public (Goffman, 1959; Keshelashvili & Trammell, 2005). Impression construction involves both the process of determining the kind of impression one tries to make and choosing how one goes about making a certain impression (Chen, 2010; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Goffman, 1959).

**Factors affecting women’s eating behaviors & the body image of each gender**

According to social comparison theory, humans always try to evaluate their attitudes, opinions and abilities (Festinger, 1954; Goodman, 2005). They use social standards and others to evaluate themselves because most opinions and abilities cannot be established by nonsocial means (Festinger, 1954; Irving, 1990, Waller & Shaw, 1994). Because people desire social approval, they are most likely to perform behaviors similar to social expectations and one’s own self-approval (Goodman, 2005). Theorists of gender performance explain how gender is not biologically determined but created through social interaction (Sallee & Harris, 2011). The idea of eating behaviors being used to cope with discomfort brought on by unfavorable social
comparisons is not new (Harrison, 2006). For interpersonal influences, both family and peers appear to influence women’s body image (Goodman, 2005). Regarding peers, middle school girls tend to face a lot of pressure to conform to the media’s beauty standards (Durham, 1990; Goodman, 2005). Some young girls are also highly critical of girls who do not conform to the media’s body ideal (Goodman, 2005). Philosopher Susan Bordo is known as an important influence over gender politics and has written extensively about the relationship between feminism and eating disorders (Grey, 2006). Male identity is changing in various ways in this era of changing gender norms, and body image has an important role in self-esteem (Piel, Pompper & Soto, 2007). Forms such as “Adonis” have represented the ideal over time (Piel, Pompper & Soto, 2007). Today, male celebrities tend to be an example of the ideal standard and for most males, the ideal body also associates with dominance and power (Piel, Pompper & Soto, 2007).

Though eating disorders affect women or men, rates of their occurrence seem to be significantly higher among females than males (Arnold & Doran, 2007). Media exposure is a significant predictor of disordered eating, anorexia, bulimia and drive for thinness (Goodman, 2005; Harrison & Cantor, 2007). Many scholars have suggested the media’s constant depiction of ultrathin models and celebrities as “beautiful” has led to increasing levels of body dissatisfaction in young women (Goodman, 2005). In many popular magazines for women, there are many advertisements and articles which recommend certain foods for weight loss (Brook, 2008). The advantages of restricted eating, measuring portions and looking at nutritional values are weighed against the enjoyment of indulgence (Brook, 2008). Currently, there are assumptions about food advertisements being fundamental to various ways in which certain companies take advantage of female stereotypes, especially when observing factors of image and health, given the nutritional focus attached to food products is seen to be feminine even if the
product category as a whole does not have obvious gender biases (Aronovsky & Furnham, 2008). Even women who do not meet the clinical definitions of eating disorders often demonstrate extreme concerns about weight and food choices (Arnold & Doran, 2007). There are also issues of communication, including communication in and about families and family roles and communication about the female role (Arnold & Doran, 2007). Disordered behaviors can become a way to communicate control or power over family settings, especially when adolescents engage in self-deprivation to defy parental control to assert personal control (Arnold & Doran, 2007).

Factors affecting men’s eating behaviors

Considerable academic research and discussion gives attention to women’s experiences with food, their bodies and weight (Buerkle, 2009). But discussing men’s relationship to food seems unusual because we focus most of our attention on women’s conflicts with eating and their issues with body image (Buerkle, 2009). Men’s eating goes largely unnoticed but culturally, food has revealed the significance of meat consumption in order to demonstrate masculinity (Buerkle, 2009). Meat, specifically red meat and beef, has been connected with masculinity in Anglo-America and Western Europe (Adams, 2003; Rifkin, 1993; Rodgers, 2008; Sobal, 2005). The consumption of foods such as tofu is implied to be emasculating and feminizing (Rodgers, 2008). The feminization of this food is due to tofu’s role in a vegetarian diet with foods such as vegetables, fruits and nuts (Rodgers, 2008). Buerkle (2009) recalls a story about his father’s acquaintances driving off gay-male customers from their family-style restaurant. The restaurant changed into a steak house because his father explained how gay men do not consume meat (Buerkle, 2009). To Buerkle’s father, the assumed lack of meat consumption was just another sign of how gay men defied normality (Buerkle, 2009).
Gendered meanings of food serve important functions in the performance of masculinity (Buerkle, 2009). The image of men as hunters with big appetites eating the animal they killed over a fire haunts our cultural notions of gender (Buerkle, 2009). Despite changes in the ideas of masculinity which includes more acceptance of the equality between men and women, men’s eating behaviors still remain a characteristic and is thought to be biologically driven, showing the differences in genders which goes beyond cultural change (Buerkle, 2009). Studies regularly show how men and women subject women’s eating behaviors to harsh criticism (Buerkle, 2009). Beth Bock, Robin Kanarek, Susan Basow and Diane Kobrynowicz found as meal size increases, women are perceived as less feminine where as men are seen to be just as masculine (Buerkle, 2009). While observing the differences between men and women’s experiences with food, young men voice a sense of entitlement to eat whatever they want, whenever they want, which is the opposite for a woman’s experience (Buerkle, 2009). The spontaneity and expansiveness of men’s eating behavior shows how men enjoy greater social freedoms and women must take note of public expectations to restrain themselves (Buerkle, 2009). Though men have experienced a lot of freedom in eating behaviors, the rise of metro sexual masculinity has created new awareness for men and their relationship with food (Buerkle, 2009). In recent years, cultural studies have given more attention to the rise of the metro sexual, a masculinity which challenges heteronormativity by incorporating gender performances which have been seen as feminine (Buerkle, 2009). Metro sexuality feminizes men’s relationship with food by restricting their access to eating whatever food they want (Buerkle, 2009).
Differences in gender performances

In the past, there have been attempts at making cooking a masculine activity through magazines such as *Playboy* (Hollows, 2002). Most issues of *Playboy* had a food and drink page, however, there was uncertainty about how to make cooking more masculine and how to integrate cooking into the bachelor lifestyle (Hallows, 2002). The first issue only contained one recipe and there is little discussion of food itself (Hallows, 2002). The relationship between food and the playboy lifestyle is suggested by means of travel and the dish is given meaning from the dish’s place in a man’s adventure to an exotic place (Hollows, 2002). The masculinity of the dish is secured by the warning at the end of the recipe by saying ‘this dish is HOT’ (despite containing no spices) (Hollows, 2002, pg. 146). Food is also linked to sex in *Playboy* through the sensuality of eating and the seductive effect of entertaining (Hollows, 2002). Barbequed steaks will make a man’s date feel more attracted to him and a glass of gin will make a woman loosen up and become more intimate (Hallows, 2002). By showing how cooking can be used to develop sexual relations, the masculine playboy cook is separated from the feminine cook whose labor creates and maintains a happy family (Hallows, 2002).

The “barbequing boom” of the late 1950’s served mainly to conform to the nature of men’s involvement in cooking and reestablishes the kitchen as a woman’s place (Hollows, 2002). Social institutions and popular culture, as described by Weedon, have made the kitchen a gendered space in which strongly held ideologies about feminine or masculine behaviors are clear (Swenson, 2009). The idea of food preparation being fun and pleasurable has roots in the assignment to the cheerful wife and mother who does all of the cooking and cleaning for loved ones because of natural and maternal instincts (Swenson, 2009). Cooking programs which taught women the preparation of a good meal was a means of displaying care towards the other
members of the family and was an integral part of being an excellent wife and mother (Solier, 2005). The selflessness of women caring for others is a powerful image in American society of what a woman should be (Devault, 1991; Swenson, 2009). Devault’s concept of gender as something “done” for others is borrowed from West and Zimmerman, who describe “doing gender” as a social activity unconsciously performed with or for another (Swenson, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 1989, pg. 38). West and Zimmerman’s definition of gender is explained as a situated performance, which is “carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to the production of gender” (Swenson, 2009, pg.39). Gender becomes an interactional and institutional occurrence, instead of a property of individuals (Swenson, 2009).

The private kitchen is a feminized space and female domain, but men have not been totally absent from kitchen culture (Swenson, 2009). Food Network programming combines food preparation with travel, adventure and competition (Swenson, 2009). Within daytime “in the kitchen” programs, two themes are significant in shows featuring men as hosts: “cooking as way to flex professional muscles” and “cooking as leisurely entertainment” (Swenson, 2009, pg. 41). On the other hand, female hosts tend to demonstrate cooking as something done for family and friends (Swenson, 2009). There were at least thirteen cookbooks intended for men which were written in America from 1946-1960 (Neuhaus, 2003; Swenson, 2009). Most of the cookbooks made for men wrote about how to prepare meat over a roaring fire, demonstrating the natural, cave-like connections between men and barbequed meat (Swenson, 2009). If he was not next to the barbeque, the male cook was seen as a hobbyist, cooking dishes with creativity for occasional fun rather than preparing dishes as an everyday task (Swenson, 2009). The main message to men in cooking during the early twentieth century was to show how despite being masters in the
professional kitchen, the private kitchen was not where they belonged (Swenson, 2009). If a man did enter the kitchen in the home, cooking had to be negotiated in certain ways to protect their masculinity (Swenson, 2009).

Cooks (2009) explained the metaphor of how people are what they eat and how this metaphor demonstrates the body as the element of consumption. If we are what we eat, then observations, which state how masculine men don’t eat quiche, meaning all gay men and women must eat quiche, tells us something about sexual identity (Cooks, 2009). The statement “ladies don’t chew with their mouths open” prescribes gender identities through what and how we eat (Cooks, 2009, pg. 101). By performing actions of eating which is morally and cultural coded, we become, through our consumption of food, what we eat (Cooks, 2009).

RQ1: How do men and women perform their gender through food and eating behaviors?

RQ2: How are gendered behaviors communicated through food?

RQ3: How are nutrition and food choices associated with masculinity and femininity?
References


