



## Research report

Impression management and food intake. Current directions in research <sup>☆</sup>Lenny R. Vartanian <sup>\*</sup>

School of Psychology, UNSW Australia, Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reviews recent research on consumption stereotypes (judgments of others based on what they eat) and impression management (modifying one's eating behavior in order to create a particular impression). A major recent focus in the literature has been on masculinity and meat eating, with research showing that meat is strongly associated with masculinity, and that individuals who follow a meat-based diet are perceived as more masculine than are individuals who follow a vegetarian diet. Although direct evidence for impression management through food intake remains sparse, a number of methodological approaches (including priming techniques and ecological valid assessments) are described that could be used in future research to identify the motives underlying people's eating behavior. Consumption stereotypes and impression management may be important influences on people's eating behavior, but the complexities of how, when, and for whom these factors influence food intake are still not well understood.

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## Introduction

People are generally motivated to present themselves in a favorable light, and the image that people convey can have implications for how they are treated by others and for how they feel about themselves. When people adjust their behavior as a means of creating a particular impression of themselves, this is referred to as impression management (or self-presentation) (Leary, 1995). As this special issue makes clear, eating behavior is vulnerable to a variety of social influences, which may include concerns with the impression that one's eating behavior makes on others. Whether it is a first date, a business lunch, or a "guys' night out," what someone chooses to eat in a variety of contexts can provide others with information about the kind of person the eater is. Under such conditions, people can modify their eating behavior as a means of creating a particular impression of themselves in the eyes of their companions. Thus, as with a range of other health behaviors (Leary, Tchividjian, & Kraxberger, 1994), food intake is a domain in which impression management can be salient and can influence people's behavior.

The potential for using one's food intake to create a particular impression on others is predicated upon certain shared consumption stereotypes – that is, characteristics that are commonly

associated with the consumption of particular foods. Vartanian, Herman, and Polivy (2007) reviewed the literature on consumption stereotypes and, although they indeed found that there are common characteristics stereotypically associated with certain eating behaviors, the literature at the time was somewhat limited. For example, most of the research on consumption stereotypes was concentrated in two specific domains: judgments of others based on what they eat, and judgments of others based on how much they eat. We found that individuals who eat healthy diets (usually diets low in fat) are consistently rated as more feminine and less masculine, as more moral but less fun, and as being healthier and having a smaller body size than are individuals who eat unhealthy diets (usually diets high in fat). Furthermore, individuals who consume smaller meals are rated as more feminine and less masculine, as more physically attractive, and, at least in some cases, as being leaner than are individuals who consume larger meals. The research therefore suggests that the conditions are ripe for people to try to impression manage by carefully choosing what or how much they eat in particular contexts. However, few studies actually have demonstrated that people modify their food intake as a means of managing the impression that they make on others.

The purpose of the present paper is to provide an update on the consumption-stereotypes and impression-management literatures. First, I describe new foci in the consumption-stereotypes literature, including research on men and meat eating. Second, I describe some novel methodological approaches that are being (or could be) used to study impression management in the context of food intake. Finally, I conclude by highlighting remaining gaps in the literature and by

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<sup>\*</sup> E-mail address: [lvartanian@psy.unsw.edu.au](mailto:lvartanian@psy.unsw.edu.au).

offering some suggestions for future research. This review promises to raise more questions than it answers, but in doing so it will hopefully both stimulate and guide future research in the area.

### Current directions in consumption-stereotypes and impression-management research

In reviewing the research on consumption stereotypes and impression management, the focus will be on highlighting some new developments in the field rather than providing an exhaustive review of all studies that have been conducted since Vartanian et al. (2007).

#### *Meat, masculinity, and morality*

Two domains that have received considerable attention in recent years are the relevance of food intake to evaluations of men (particularly with respect to masculinity), and the stereotypes associated with a vegetarian vs. meat-based diet (with respect to masculinity, but also morality). In our earlier review, we noted that very few studies had examined judgments of men based on what they ate. For example, Stein and Nemeroff (1995) showed that men who ate unhealthy foods were rated as more masculine (and less feminine) than were men who ate healthy foods. Although some research suggested that men who ate larger meals were rated as more masculine than were men who ate smaller meals (Bock & Kanarek, 1995), other studies did not find the same effects (e.g., Chaiken & Pliner, 1987). There were even fewer studies at the time that had examined perceptions of vegetarians: One study by Sadalla and Burroughs (1981) reported that vegetarians were described as pacifist, liberal, and also as hypochondriacal. Fortunately, recent research has added to our understanding of these domains.

Meat eating has long been tied to masculinity in social discourse (see Adams, 1990, 2003), but empirical examinations of this association have been relatively rare. More recent discussions of meat have centered on moral issues related to its consumption (e.g., animal welfare and the environmental impact of meat production), as well as the health benefits associated with a vegetarian diet (e.g., Ruby, 2012). However, the fact remains that rates of vegetarianism are quite low in most Western cultures, particularly among men. Although there are many reasons why people continue to eat meat (such as enjoyment of the taste or a lack of familiarity with vegetarian diets; Lea & Worsley, 2003), one set of reasons for the low uptake of vegetarianism might be related to identity, consumption stereotypes, and impression management. Specifically, men might believe that adopting a vegetarian diet would threaten their masculine identity, and this potential threat might act as a barrier to adopting a vegetarian diet. Support for this explanation would come from a demonstrated link between meat and masculinity (and vegetarianism and femininity), from evidence that people judge meat eaters to be more masculine than vegetarians, and from evidence that men eat meat when they are motivated to appear more masculine.

#### *Meat and maleness*

Rozin, Hormes, Faith, and Wansink (2012) provided a range of evidence supporting the connection between meat and masculinity. For example, in one study, participants rated how “male” or “female” various foods were. Foods such as steak and hamburgers were rated as the most male, whereas foods such as chocolate and peaches were rated as most female. The results of that study indicate that meat is indeed considered male, but only when it is defined in terms of mammalian muscle (chicken and fish were not strongly associated with maleness). In another study, Rozin et al. found that participants responded more quickly when meat-related words (beef, pork, hamburger) were paired with typical male names (e.g., John) than when they were paired with typical female names (e.g., Mary). As a final example, Rozin et al. demonstrated that many languages around

the world assign male gender to meat-related words. Collectively, these findings indicate that meat does tend to be associated with maleness, which gives rise to the possibility that consumption of meat would be associated with masculine characteristics and that the avoidance of meat (i.e., vegetarianism) would be associated with feminine characteristics. This suggestion is further supported by evidence that masculinity is positively correlated with beef consumption and is negatively correlated with a vegetarian diet (Rothgerber, 2013).

#### *Consumption stereotypes*

Recent research has also assessed the stereotypes associated with the consumption of vegetarian and omnivorous/meat-based diets. For example, Ruby and Heine (2011) examined judgments of vegetarians vs. omnivores in terms of moral virtue and masculinity. Participants read a brief description of a male or female target person, and were asked to make judgments of that person on a range of characteristics. In their first study, the target was implicitly described as a vegetarian or as an omnivore through his/her food choices (“The foods she eats most regularly are tofu [lamb], vegetable tempura [lean beef], salad, whole wheat bread, and lentils [chicken burgers].”). In the second study, the target was explicitly labeled as a vegetarian or omnivore (“She follows a varied vegetarian [omnivorous] diet; eating a broad range of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts and beans (but no fish or meat) [meat and fish], and usually cooks for herself”). In both studies, the vegetarian was rated as being less masculine than the omnivore (particularly for male targets). Furthermore, participants rated the vegetarian as more virtuous than the omnivore, even when controlling for perceptions of the healthiness of the diet. Interestingly, these results emerged even though the non-vegetarians did not consume a meat-centered diet (i.e., the diet was described as varied, but did include meat). This finding suggests that the effects are driven by the costs (for masculinity) and benefits (for morality) of following a vegetarian diet. Rozin et al. (2012; Study 3) also examined evaluations of a target’s femininity and masculinity based on his or her stated food preferences. They found that targets who were described as preferring a beef-based diet were rated as less feminine than were targets described as preferring a vegetable-based diet, and (at least for female targets) were also seen as more masculine than were the targets described as preferring a vegetable-based diet.

It is interesting to note that there is an inconsistent gender-of-target effect in the Ruby and Heine (2011) study (stronger effects for male targets) and the Rozin et al. (2012) study (stronger effects for female targets), which echoes the inconsistencies in earlier research (Bock & Kanarek, 1995; Chaiken & Pliner, 1987; Oakes & Slotterback, 2004–2005). The discrepancy in this case may have to do with the differences in how the non-vegetarian diets were defined: the Ruby and Heine studies used an omnivorous diet (which included meat, but did not have meat as the dominant feature of the diet), whereas the Rozin et al. study used a meat-centric diet. These different diets may have created different gender-based expectancies, which in turn could have influenced the pattern of results. Overall, the results of these studies suggest that a vegetarian vs. meat-based diet does influence perceptions of the eater, both in terms of morality and dimensions of masculinity/femininity. However, whether the implications for one’s gender identity are more relevant to men or women remains unclear.

#### *Impression management and masculinity*

Only a few studies to date have provided evidence of what might be considered impression management of a masculine identity in the context of food. Gal and Wilkie (2010; Experiment 4) either threatened or affirmed their male participants’ masculinity by having them list things they would do with their platonic female friends but not with their platonic male friends (threat condition), or list things they would do with their platonic male friends but not with

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