



## Portion size tells who I am, food type tells who you are: Specific functions of amount and type of food in same- and opposite-sex dyadic eating contexts



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### ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that women eating small portions of food (vs. eating big portions) are perceived as more feminine, whereas men eating large portions are perceived as more masculine. The specific type of food items have also been shown to carry connotations for gender stereotyping. In addition, matching the co-eater's food quantity is also a means to ingratiate him or her. Thus, a potential motivational conflict between gender identity expression and ingratiation arises when people eat in opposite-sex dyads. Scholars have, thus far, focused their attention on one of these two dimensions at a time, and rarely in relation to the co-eaters' sex. The present study investigated, through a restaurant scenario, the way in which women and men, when asked to imagine having lunch in dyads, combine food choice and quantity regulation as a function of the co-eater's sex. Results showed that participants use the quantity dimension to communicate gender identity, and the food type dimension to ingratiate the co-eater's preferences by matching her/his presumed choice, following gender-based stereotypes about food. In opposite-sex dyads, dishes that incorporate the two dimensions were chosen above the expected frequency.

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Mary is sitting at a restaurant table with her friend John. Mary feels she should eat lightly, but at the same time she worries about appearing too picky in front of John. John loves the big burgers with fries that he often eats with his friends, but he is concerned not to appear too uncouth in Mary's eyes. This scenario exemplifies the dilemma people may face when eating in social situations. Indeed, many studies have documented that food choice in social situations fulfils a function of impression management (Herman, Roth, & Polivy, 2003; Vartanian, 2015). In particular, this literature shows that both the quantity of food eaten and the type of food chosen are useful tools in signaling gender identity and creating a good impression in co-eaters' eyes (for a review, see Vartanian, Herman, & Polivy, 2007). This is because there are cultural shared expectations regarding how much and what kind of food a feminine woman or a "real man" should eat: For example, women are expected to prefer vegetables, white meat, fish or dairy food in small

quantities, whereas men are expected to prefer large portions of red meat (e.g. Rozin, Hormes, Faith, & Wansink, 2012; Stein & Nemeroff, 1995). Thus, when people conform to those expectations they successfully appear as particularly feminine or masculine (for a recent review, see Higgs & Thomas, 2016).

However, another line of research examining impression management revealed that adapting one's behaviour to that of a co-eater is also a means by which to gain social approval (for a recent meta-analysis, see Vartanian, Spanos, Herman, & Polivy, 2015). Indeed, individuals eating in pairs tend to adapt their food intake to that of their companion in order to enhance social acceptance (e.g. Hermans et al., 2012; Robinson, Tobias, Shaw, Freeman, & Higgs, 2011). Therefore, in same-sex dyads, eating the amount and the type of food stereotypically associated with one's gender would be the best choice, as this allows to express one's own gender identity while at the same time matching the other's presumed preferences (on the basis of gender stereotypes). But in opposite-sex dyads, the motivation to express one's own gender identity while also ingratiating the co-eater via imitation could diverge and pose a problem of choice.

To date, scholars interested in expressive and communicative

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functions of food have mostly studied the quantity and quality dimensions of food choice regulation separately (e.g. [Dibb-Smith and Brindal, 2015](#); [Hermans et al., 2012](#); [Kaisari and Higgs, 2015](#)). A recent exception is a study in which both portion size and food type (masculine vs feminine) were manipulated and crossed. It showed that they both influenced the perceived food–gender association and that this association mediated the intention of women and men to eat their gender-congruent food, irrespective of the situation in which the dish will be consumed ([Cavazza, Butera, & Guidetti, 2015a](#)). However, in this study participants evaluated their intention to eat the proposed foods without reference to a concrete interpersonal context. Thus, only the function of gender identity expression has been considered, while neglecting the ingratiating motivation.

We present a study in which we investigated whether people eating in dyads, and in conditions in which they decide both the amount and the type of food to be eaten, ascribe a specific function to quantity and quality dimensions in order to manage both their gender identity expression and the presumed preferences of the co-eater, based on self- and other-stereotypes, respectively.

## 1. Food amount

In the epic 20th century movie *Gone with the wind*, the iconic female lead Scarlett is advised by Mammy to eat like a bird when it comes to having dinner with Mr Wilkes, as befits a lady. That food amount suppression could be a matter of femininity display is a piece of folk wisdom that received empirical support in scientific literature. Indeed, different studies documented that eating little elicits a feminine impression ([Chaiken and Pliner, 1987](#); [Pliner and Chaiken, 1990](#)). The association between eating lightly, or dieting, and femininity is widespread and shared ([Bourdieu, 1984](#); [Fagerli and Wandel, 1999](#); [McPhail, Beagan, & Chapman, 2012](#); [Sobal, 2005](#)). Moreover, limiting the food amount seems to be a deliberate behaviour for women, who were shown to regulate food consumption as a strategy of gender identity reaffirmation ([Mori, Chaiken, & Pliner, 1987](#); [Robinson et al., 2011](#)). In line with this, [Young, Mizzau, Mai, Sirisegaram, and Wilson \(2009\)](#) observed male and female university students eating together in the naturalistic setting of a cafeteria in Canada. They confirmed the main effect of eater's sex, such that women tended to eat less than men. However, interestingly, they also highlighted that, in same-sex dyads, men and women ate a similar amount of calories, whereas in opposite sex-dyads, women particularly tended to choose food with fewer calories than men. In sum, if eating lightly is a behaviour particularly manifested by women, they further minimize their intake when motivated to affirm their own gender identity (e.g., in opposite-sex dyads).

Another line of research highlighted that food quantity may also be regulated in order to match the co-eater's intake, because similarity among co-eaters facilitates the creation of a good impression. [Robinson et al. \(2011\)](#) found that female participants converged with a confederate who ate a large quantity of popcorn after priming need of social acceptance, whereas this convergence did not emerge in a neutral condition.

The two research projects illustrated above exemplify how food amount regulation may fulfil both a function of gender identity expression and of ingratiation, particularly for women. However, in opposite-sex dyads, a woman should eat little in order to appear feminine, but also eat like a man (i.e., a lot) in order to match her co-eater. How does she overcome this dilemma? Fortunately, in real situations we have the opportunity to vary another useful symbolic dimension of food: food type.

## 2. Food type

Food type also conveys femininity or masculinity ([Sobal, 2005](#)). A great deal of research has examined the so-called gender-stereotyped foods present in every culture (e.g., [Counihan and Kaplan, 2004](#)). This line of study showed that red meat is widely perceived as the prototypical food for men, whereas vegetables, dairy products, fish, fruit and sweets are generally considered feminine foods ([O'Doherty Jensen & Holm, 1999](#)). As other gender role expectations, men and women learn in the course of experience what is a gender-appropriate food choice ([Rolls, Fedoroff, & Guthrie, 1991](#)). The consequence is that co-eaters perceive masculinity or femininity of targets based on the foods they eat (e.g., [Stein and Nemeroff, 1995](#)). Observers rate both men and women eating “feminine” foods as more feminine than those eating “masculine” foods ([Chaiken and Pliner, 1987](#); [Mooney and Lorenz, 1997](#); [Mori et al., 1987](#); [Stein and Nemeroff, 1995](#)).

Likewise, [White and Dahl \(2006\)](#) found that food choices are influenced by the desire of the eaters to dissociate themselves from a devaluated reference group (e.g., men preferred not to eat a steak that was defined in the menu as a “lady's cut”). [Gal and Wilkie \(2010\)](#) proposed a similar manipulation of the dish label, naming the same courses in a menu either in a feminine (e.g., Filet Paulette) or in a masculine way (e.g., Rutherford Ribeye). Participants had to order a meal in conditions of high vs low cognitive resource availability. Results showed that women tended to choose a greater number of feminine than masculine items, irrespective of resource availability, whereas men tended to order gender congruent dishes particularly in a condition of high resource availability.

However, these studies did not consider the co-eaters' sex. Actually, research examining gender-stereotypical food consumption has almost exclusively limited the attention to food's expressive function of identity, whereas evidence regarding the influence of a co-eater's characteristics is very scant. Taking the co-eaters' sex into consideration, a recent study ([Cavazza, Guidetti, & Butera, 2015b](#)) showed that participants tended to prefer their co-eaters' gender-congruent foods over and above their own gender-congruent foods. In this case participants had to express the likelihood to eat either a Caprese salad (i.e., a feminine dish) or a hamburger (i.e., a masculine dish) during a dinner with a man or a woman. Male and female participants were more likely to prefer the feminine food when eating with women and the less feminine food when eating with men, even though this orientation to adapt their choice to the co-eaters was particularly true for men. This pattern did not change when the co-eater was a dating partner. However, participants only had the opportunity to vary their choice of food type, but not the amount, as a function of their co-eaters' sex.

## 3. The present research

Examining the literature on the psychological functions covered by food regulation and food choice in terms of gender identity expression and ingratiation, a motivational conflict appears as a potential outcome of eating in opposite-sex dyads. Indeed, when a person eats with an opposite-sex partner, the motivation to model the presumed other's choice is at odds with the motivation to express one's own gender identity (i.e. making gender-congruent choices). The question of whether individuals reconcile the two motivations, ascribing a specific and prevalent function to quantity regulation and food choice, is still open, because the experimental paradigms used in the studies reviewed above did not give participants the opportunity to vary both food type and amount in relation to the co-eater's sex. This is why we devised the present study, in which we asked male and female participants to imagine

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