



Research report

Impression management and food intake. Current directions in research [☆]Lenny R. Vartanian ^{*}

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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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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

their platonic female friends (affirmation condition). Next, participants completed an ostensibly unrelated food-preference task in which they were simply asked to select their preferred food (dessert) or drink between two options. One option from each pair was a feminine food/drink (e.g., “Cloud Nine Ice Cream”; “Linden Flower Tea”) and the other option was a masculine food/drink (e.g., “Chunky Fudge Cake Ice Cream”; “Irish Breakfast Tea”). The authors reasoned that a threatened masculine identity would lead men to make more gender-congruent choices as a means of re-affirming their masculine identity. They found that male participants in the threat condition were more likely to select the masculine food/drink options than the feminine food/drink options, but only when they were given unlimited time to make their decisions. One explanation for this finding might be that participants who were given unlimited time to make their choices could consider how their choices would help bolster their masculine identity; those who made their choices under time pressure, in contrast, did not have the time to consider the implications of their choices for their masculine identity.

Lipschitz and Herman (2010) also manipulated male participants' masculine identity by giving them bogus feedback on an “interests” questionnaire and examined the impact of this manipulation on how much meat pizza participants consumed. When participants were given the choice between a vegetarian pizza and a meat pizza, participants who had their masculinity threatened ate more meat pizza than did participants who had their masculinity affirmed, presumably in an attempt to bolster their masculine image. When participants were only served meat pizza (i.e., were not given a choice), the reverse pattern was observed: threatened participants ate less than did the affirmed participants. The authors reasoned that threatened participants could not restore their masculinity in this latter case because they were not freely choosing to consume the meat pizza (it was the only pizza given to them), and were instead perhaps trying to appear desirable in some other respect (e.g., polite).

Finally, White and Dahl (2006) provided evidence that men are motivated to avoid “feminine” foods. In a series of studies, participants were asked to imagine that they were having dinner and were given a menu from which to select their meal. Male participants were less likely to choose a steak if it was described as “ladies’ cut” than if it was described as “chef’s cut,” and this was particularly true if participants thought that their consumption would be public or if they were high in public self-consciousness (conditions under which impression-management concerns should be particularly heightened). For female participants, the choice of steak did not vary as a function of labeling condition, even when their consumption would be public.

Summary

Overall, the results of these studies suggest that men can use impression management through food intake to bolster their masculine identity. First, meat appears to be strongly associated with “maleness” in people’s minds. Second, there is evidence that meat eaters are seen as more masculine than are vegetarians. Third, there is some suggestion that men might use their food choices as a means of bolstering their masculine identity, but clear evidence in this respect is still lacking. Furthermore, no studies have specifically examined meat consumption as an impression-management tactic among men.

Implicit stereotypes

A recent addition to the consumption-stereotypes literature is the examination of implicit food associations. Implicit cognitions have been an important part of the attitudes and stereotypes literatures over the past two decades (e.g., Nosek, Hawkins, & Frazier, 2011), and have also been examined specifically in relation to food attitudes (e.g., Roefs & Jansen, 2002). A few recent studies have also

assessed people’s implicit food-related stereotypes. For example, Rozin et al. (2012) had participants complete an Implicit Association Test (IAT) in which they classified meat-related words (e.g., beef) and vegetable-related words (e.g., corn), as well as typical male names (e.g., Robert) and typical female names (e.g., Mary). Participants were faster to respond to meat–male pairings than to meat–female pairings, although the effect size was rather small (Cohen’s $d = 0.26$); the authors did not report the data for the categorizing vegetables with either male or female names, so it is unknown whether there is a corresponding vegetable–female association. (Note that Rozin et al. did not use the standard IAT scoring procedure in which a total IAT score is derived from participants’ response times for meat–male/vegetable–female pairings relative to response times for meat–female/vegetable–male pairings.) Two other studies examined gender-based implicit food stereotypes in Japanese samples. Kimura et al. (2009) used a semantic priming procedure and found that participants responded more quickly to female proper names following a feminine-food prime, and responded more quickly to male proper names following a masculine-food prime. Kimura et al. (2012) extended this finding by demonstrating that, in addition to the food-based stereotypes demonstrated in their previous study, the presentation of the food (specifically, whether the food was served in a feminine dish or in a masculine dish) can also influence gendered evaluations of the food. Taken together, these studies provide evidence that people (in both Western and non-Western cultures) do indeed have implicit food-based stereotypes.

The existence of implicit food stereotypes could have implications for understanding people’s eating behavior and impression management related to food intake. Implicit cognitions have been shown to predict spontaneous, non-verbal behaviors (e.g., Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Nosek et al., 2011). Most relevant to the current context, research has shown that implicit food cognitions are particularly potent drivers of behavior when one’s self-regulatory resources are low. For example, Hofmann, Rauch, and Gawronski (2007) showed that, under normal conditions, participants’ candy consumption was predicted by their self-reported level of dietary restraint. However, when participants had their self-regulatory resources depleted, it was their implicit attitudes toward candy (and not their level of dietary restraint) that predicted candy consumption. In the current context, it may be that one’s general food preferences or even one’s explicit consumption stereotypes drive behavior when one has ample time and self-regulatory resources to deliberate about one’s choices; when self-regulatory capacity is low, however, implicit food stereotypes might be driving food intake and impression-management efforts. Although this suggestion follows directly from previous research on implicit food attitudes, it appears to be inconsistent with the results of a study by Gal and Wilkie (2010, Experiment 1). Those authors found that male participants selected more masculine food options than feminine food options but only when there was no time restriction placed on their decision; those who made food choices under time pressure were just as likely to select masculine and feminine food items. One explanation for this apparent inconsistency might be that participants did not have strong implicit associations with the specific foods used in the study by Gal and Wilkie, and that participants’ choices were instead based on their explicit associations. In any case, the potential for implicit and explicit food stereotypes to differentially predict behavior under different circumstances would be an interesting path for future research to pursue.

Relative consumption

Another interesting development in the consumption-stereotypes literature is the examination of the relative nature of people’s food intake in social situations. Most of the work on consumption stereotypes focuses on evaluations of a single individual based on his

or her food intake or eating habits in isolation. In the real world, however, it would typically be a social eating context that allows for individuals to be evaluated on the basis of their food intake. In such cases, the food intake of others can establish a context or benchmark against which to evaluate the consumption of a particular individual. This could be true when we are evaluating our co-eaters, when we are evaluating ourselves in the context of those co-eaters, or when an outside observer is evaluating us and/or our co-eaters. The meaning of eating a small garden salad would presumably differ depending on whether the other eaters in the group were also eating small garden salads or were instead eating large slabs of beef. Similarly, the amount of food eaten by others would presumably act as a benchmark against which to evaluate a particular individual's food intake. Herman and colleagues (Herman, Roth, & Polivy, 2003; Vartanian, Sokol, Herman, & Polivy, 2013) have argued that people are motivated to eat as much palatable food as they can without eating to excess, and that "excess" in this context is defined by the behavior of one's co-eaters. A co-eater who eats a lot effectively gives one permission to eat as much as one wants without appearing to eat "too much".

Recognizing the potential importance of relative consumption, Leone, Herman, and Pliner (2008) tested the hypothesis that people's evaluations of their interaction partner would depend on how much the interaction partner ate relative to how much they themselves had eaten. Participants in Leone et al.'s studies (all females) first ate as much pizza as they wanted to fill themselves up, then learned how much pizza the other participant (actually a confederate) had eaten. The manipulated variable was whether the confederate ate more or less than the participant did. In both studies, participants indicated that they liked the confederate more if she had eaten more than they did compared to if she had eaten less than they did. Note that this effect is in contrast to the majority of research on consumption stereotypes (in which women who eat minimally are evaluated most favorably), which further highlights the importance of relative intake as a context for consumption stereotypes. Interestingly, Leone et al. (2008) found that outside observers did not show the same pattern of increased liking for the confederate who ate more than the participant did. Overall, these findings suggest that the capacity for one's behavior to elicit a particular impression might depend on the context created by what others are eating and might also depend on who is doing the evaluating. This focus on relative consumption adds an entirely new dimension to the consumption-stereotypes and impression-management literatures that has not been considered in most studies, and that should be explored further in future research. (See Polivy and Pliner's paper in this issue, which provides a detailed review of social comparison processes pertaining to eating.)

Factors that increase impression-management concerns

There are a variety of situational features that should affect whether (or the extent to which) impression-management concerns drive a person's food intake. Who a person is eating with, for example, should play a significant role in determining the magnitude and nature of the impression-management concerns. Indeed, this has been offered as an explanation for why social facilitation of food intake is less pronounced when eating with strangers than when eating with friends (e.g., de Castro, 1994): People are more concerned with making a good impression on less familiar others (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995), and eating minimally might be one means of doing so (Herman et al., 2003). Thus, examining contexts that can be expected to heighten impression-management concerns can provide important information about the motives underlying food intake in those contexts.

One context in which impression-management concerns should be particularly salient is in initiating a romantic relationship.

Furthermore, because food is often involved with dating (e.g., going out for dinner), there are ample opportunities to use food as a means of achieving one's impression-management goals. Not only do dating contexts heighten the desire to create a good impression, but dating contexts (at least in heterosexual relationships) might also increase the salience of traditional gender roles. In general, then, we might expect dating contexts to increase people's desire to make a good impression, to appear masculine/feminine, and to appear attractive (or at least not appear repulsive). The consumption-stereotypes literature suggests that each of those impression goals could be achieved by carefully planning one's food intake. Amiraian and Sobal (2009) examined this question by asking people what they considered to be "dating foods" and "not dating foods," and by exploring the reasons behind those beliefs. Although women were more likely to endorse traditional feminine foods (such as salad) as dating foods, the men in their study did not endorse traditional masculine foods (such as meat) as dating foods. In fact, men rejected meat in a dating context, describing it as "not a dating food." (Note that it is possible that respondents in that study were answering the questions in terms of their generalized beliefs of what people consider to be acceptable or appropriate, rather than in terms of their reflections on what they themselves do or might do in dating situations. It is also possible that eating meat on a date would introduce a range of negative connotations, in addition to any benefits to perceived masculinity, so that on balance men are better off avoiding meat in that context.) Many of the explanations that participants provided for why foods were not ideal dating foods had to do with the fact that the food was messy/difficult to eat, or that it would have (or produce in the eater) a bad odor. Interestingly, the desire to enhance one's masculinity/femininity or one's own social appeal did not emerge among the most frequently cited explanations.

Another context in which people might be motivated to make a good impression, and in which the outcomes of one's impression-management efforts might carry particular weight, is when meeting with a prospective employer or a potential client over a meal. If one's food intake conveys certain personal characteristics that could be relevant to job performance (e.g., competence, intelligence, trustworthiness), then what one chooses to eat in this context could have a positive or negative influence on one's business prospects. There are no studies that address this issue, and it is therefore a topic that is in need of future research.

Methodological advances

Given the dearth of research directly assessing impression management in the context of food intake, it is difficult to conclude with any confidence that individuals' eating behavior is driven by impression-management concerns. Although research has shown that people hold a range of consumption stereotypes, and that people's food intake can be altered by the social context, there is little direct evidence that people modify their eating behavior *in order to* convey a particular image. Bridging this gap in the literature would be an important development in understanding how impression-management motives influence people's food intake.

Impression motivation

One approach to determine whether or not people do modify their eating behavior to convey a certain image is to threaten some aspect of an individual's identity, and then to assess whether this threat leads to predictable changes in eating behavior (based on known consumption stereotypes). Rogers (2008) provided a rich description of how this sort of identity threat/compensatory behavior is played out in television advertisements. For example, an advertisement for Del Taco shows a man who, inept at assembling a piece of furniture, experiences a "crisis of masculinity" that can be

resolved by consuming a Del Taco burrito (depicted as a “masculine” food). As another example, an advertisement for Hummer shows a man who, being observed by others purchasing tofu and other “feminine” food products, feels his masculinity threatened, which he then resolves by purchasing a Hummer. (See [Rogers, 2008](#), for a more detailed analysis of these advertisements, as well as Burger King’s “manthem” advertisement.)

An early study by [Mori, Chaiken, and Pliner \(1987, Study 2\)](#) used an identity threat approach to assess impression management of food intake among women. Prior to engaging in a “get acquainted” conversation with a male confederate, female participants were provided with false feedback indicating that their interests were “typically male” (high-threat condition) or “typically female” (low-threat condition). Furthermore, the researchers manipulated whether or not the male confederate was aware of the participant’s feedback. Participants who had their femininity threatened ate less if their partner was aware of that feedback than if their partner was unaware of that feedback, presumably because they wanted to demonstrate to the partner that they were indeed quite feminine. (Recall that eating minimally is generally considered to be feminine behavior; [Vartanian et al., 2007](#).) [Lipschitz and Herman \(2010\)](#) further showed that male participants who had their masculine identity threatened ate more meat pizza than did those who had their masculine identity affirmed, but only when they were given the choice between meat pizza (a masculine food) and vegetarian pizza (a feminine food). Finally, [Gal and Wilkie \(2010\)](#) examined the impact of identity threat on participants’ preferences from a list of masculine and feminine foods. In that study, male participants who had their masculine identity threatened chose more masculine foods than feminine foods from the list, but only when they had ample time to deliberate about their decisions; under time pressure, threatened participants were equally likely to choose masculine and feminine foods. Research examining how threats to specific aspects of an individual’s identity influence specific eating behaviors is needed to further bolster the notion that people can and do change their eating behavior to satisfy their impression-management goals.

Another way of examining the effect of impression-management motivation on food intake is to directly manipulate people’s impression-management goals. [Remick \(2010\)](#) tested this idea in a series of studies in which participants were told to “try to make a good impression” or to “try to avoid making a good impression” on an interaction partner. Across three studies, there was a fairly consistent pattern of results: Female participants ate less and took less food when they were trying to make a good impression (compared to when they were trying to avoid making a good impression), and when they were eating with a male partner compared to a female partner. These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that women eat less in situations that are assumed to heighten impression-management concerns (e.g., with an attractive male partner; [Mori et al., 1987](#); [Pliner & Chaiken, 1990](#)), but also provide a more direct test of the underlying motive (i.e., impression management).

Rather than threatening individuals’ identity, or explicitly asking participants to “try to make a good impression” (which might evoke certain demand effects), another approach that could be taken to determine the motivational underpinnings of one’s eating behavior is to use a variety of priming techniques. Research in social psychology has repeatedly shown that subtly activating specific concepts in participants’ minds can directly influence their behavior related to those primed concepts. For example, priming gender identity has been shown to influence performance on a math test ([Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999](#)), priming competence has been found to influence cooperation on a task ([Utz, Ouwerkerk, & Van Lange, 2004](#)), and priming behavioral goals can generally facilitate a range of goal-congruent behaviors (e.g., [Chartrand & Bargh, 1996](#); [Papies & Hamstra, 2010](#)). Following from these studies, researchers could

prime impression-management goals, or prime specific aspects of participants’ identity, and assess the impact of those priming manipulations on participants’ eating behavior. Collectively, these approaches could provide evidence that having a particular impression-management goal is directly associated with specific and predictable changes in eating behavior.

Ecologically valid assessments

Outside of the laboratory, other approaches can be used to explore eating motives in a more ecologically valid context. There are a range of methodologies that allow researchers to capture dynamic processes as they unfold in people’s everyday lives, including daily diaries and ecological momentary assessment. These methods offer a range of advantages over traditional survey or laboratory methods (see [Smyth & Heron, 2012](#)). Cross-sectional self-report studies may ask participants to recall events that transpired in the past, to report how they “generally feel,” or to imagine how they might behave in a particular setting, all of which are potentially subject to response biases. Even controlled laboratory experiments, which eliminate extraneous variables and allow researchers to draw causal inferences, are conducted in fairly artificial settings that limit their external validity. Daily or momentary assessments reduce retrospective bias by having participants report on events with minimal delay, increase ecological validity by examining people’s experiences *in situ*, and allow researchers to examine complex and dynamic relationships among various factors that might be at play. Research using these approaches could provide a valuable addition to the impression-management literature, allowing researchers to capture the motives underlying people’s eating behavior in their everyday lives, variability in those motives across individuals, and variability within individuals across contexts (e.g., depending on who the interaction partner is, what the setting is, etc.).

Studies in other domains have examined people’s self-presentational motives using a daily diary approach ([Leary et al., 1994](#); [Nezlek, Schütz, & Sellin, 2007](#)). Participants in those studies recorded their daily, face-to-face interactions with other people. For each interaction, participants were asked to report the extent to which it was important for them to convey a particular impression to their interaction partner(s), which included attributes such as friendly, likeable, intelligent, and attractive. Importantly, those studies show that the level of impression-management motivation varies depending on who the interaction partner is, and that the specific impression people are motivated to convey (e.g., competent vs. attractive) varies depending on the situation. Another study examined the connection between a specific behavior (alcohol consumption) and individuals’ impression-management concerns ([O’Grady, Harman, Gleason, & Wilson, 2012](#)). University students completed an electronic diary once a day for 21 days in which they recorded their social interactions, the impressions that they were motivated to make (in this case, the researchers focused on a desire to appear attractive), and the number of alcoholic drinks that they consumed. Overall, the desire to appear attractive when interacting with others was related to greater alcohol consumption. Using a similar approach in the context of eating behavior could help to identify the impact of impression-management motives on people’s food intake, as well as the contextual factors that can influence that association.

Summary

Research on impression management and food intake has lagged behind research on consumption stereotypes, and this may be in part due to the challenges associated with assessing impression-management motives in this context. The methodological approaches described above provide a range of pathways that can be used to

study these processes in future research. Although each of these methods has its own strengths and weaknesses, collectively these approaches will provide a richer understanding of how impression-management motives can influence people's food intake.

Unanswered questions and future directions

There have been some interesting and informative developments in research on consumption stereotypes and impression management, but there are still a number of major gaps remaining in the literature. Most obvious is the relative lack of research directly assessing impression management through food intake. The vast majority of studies in this domain focus on establishing a link between certain eating behaviors and perceived personal characteristics (i.e., consumption stereotypes). There is some evidence that people do modify their food intake in situations in which one might expect heightened impression-management concerns (such as when a female participant is interacting with an attractive male confederate), but there are no studies demonstrating that people modify their food intake in those situations *in order to* manage the impression others have of them. By using the methodological advances described in the section above, significant progress can be made in this regard.

Another issue that has not been addressed in the impression-management literature is whether people's self-perceptions change after they have consumed particular foods. Theoretically, impression management can serve the purpose of maintaining one's own self-image, as well as conveying a particular image to others (Paulhus, 1984; Paulhus & John, 1998). Do men feel more masculine after eating meat (as Rothgerber, 2013, suggests)? Do women feel more feminine or more attractive after eating a salad? Of course, given the discussion of relative consumption above, the process of self-evaluation could be further complicated by the presence of others: Men might not feel less "manly" while eating quiche or tofu unless they are doing so under the judgmental gaze of a group of voracious carnivores or a woman they are trying to impress (cf. White & Dahl, 2006). In any case, future research is needed to identify the role that self-perceptions play in people's use of food intake as an impression-management tactic.

A related question is whether or not impression-management efforts work; that is, can we change people's perceptions of us by modifying what we eat? The consumption-stereotypes literature suggests that we can, but those studies typically present information about food preferences or prior consumption in isolation. Would we expect the same effects to emerge in the context of a more dynamic social interaction? It is also worth considering that most of our meals are likely to be eaten with people who are familiar to us and who therefore have some prior knowledge about our personal characteristics and qualities. Under those circumstances, would our food choices influence perceptions that familiar others have of us? The answers to these questions would provide valuable information about how important consumption stereotypes and impression management are in the context of eating behavior, and how relevant these processes are to people's everyday lives.

Most of the research on consumption stereotypes and impression management has focused on adults, and it would also be important to determine whether these processes operate among children and adolescents as well. Younger people might be more impressionable and more concerned with "fitting in," and we might thus expect impression-management concerns to be particularly salient in this age group. Some researchers have suggested that impression-management concerns can explain the observation that overweight children eat less when they are eating with others (Salvy, de la Haye, Bowker, & Hermans, 2012). Similarly, impression-management motives might also influence the types of foods that children and adolescents eat. For example, boys who eat the most

unhealthy snacks and fast foods also tend to be the most popular (de la Haye, Robins, Mohr, & Wilson, 2010). Furthermore, Stok, De Ridder, Adriaanse, and De Wit (2010) found that male adolescents who were motivated by the desire to appear autonomous ("self-presentational autonomy") purchased more unhealthy snacks over a three-day period than did male adolescents who were less motivated by these self-presentational concerns. Thus, impression-management motives might be particularly salient drivers of eating behaviors among young people, and this is an area in need of more research.

A final gap in the literature worth pointing out is that research on consumption stereotypes typically provides participants with information about a target person's recent food intake or food preferences without mention of the motives behind those eating behaviors. Information about the motives underlying a person's eating behavior might well influence people's judgments of the target. In the context of a vegetarian diet, for example, an individual's decision to not eat meat might be based on health or weight-management concerns, concern with animal welfare, concerns with the environmental impact of meat production, or simply an individual's dislike of the taste of meat. Similarly, following a gluten-free diet may be related to the management of a digestive disorder (such as celiac disease) or might simply be driven by the latest "health craze". In each of these cases, it is conceivable that people's evaluations of the target person based on his or her diet might vary according to the reason behind that diet, and this is a dimension that should be explored in future research.

Conclusion

Important progress has been made in our understanding of consumption stereotypes and impression management, but there are a number of areas that remain unexplored. Recent research indicates that there is a strong connection between meat and masculinity (and between vegetarianism and femininity), highlights the importance of considering a person's food intake in the context of what others are eating, and outlines certain situational factors that can influence the level of impression-management concerns. Although research directly assessing impression-management motives is sparse, there are a number of methodological approaches that can aid researchers in uncovering the motives underlying people's eating behavior (including priming techniques and ecologically valid assessments). 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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