

You are What You Eat: Women's Evaluation of other Women Based on their Food Selection

Hannah Hunter¹, Maryanne L. Fisher¹, & Charlotte De Backer²

¹Saint Mary's University

²University of Antwerp

ABSTRACT

Past research has shown that women who eat unhealthy foods are rated as less attractive and are perceived to have a less desirable personality than women who eat healthy foods. However, eating too healthily is also perceived negatively. Framing these past findings using an evolutionary perspective, we investigated if and how ratings of women changed when participants learned the target had allegedly consumed primarily healthy, unhealthy, or a balanced diet of healthy and unhealthy foods within the last day. We not only focused on perceived attractiveness and personality ratings, but included a measure of perceived rivalry as well. Results show that getting dietary information about a target woman changes other women's perceptions of the target's attractiveness, personality and capacities as a sexual rival. Keeping with our predictions, women portrayed with unhealthy diet choices received the poorest overall ratings. In contrast to recent findings that eating only healthy foods leads to poorer ratings too, our results show that women who exclusively ate healthy foods within the last day received the most favorable ratings and were seen as the most threatening. Women paired with a balanced diet choice received in-between ratings that were significantly different from both other conditions, except for some specific personality traits. In sum, these results show that studying food choice behavior is an avenue worthy of further exploration in the domain of evolutionary psychology.

KEYWORDS

Diet, Attractiveness, Social Impressions, Intrasexual Competition, Women

Food studies is an emerging field of inquiry that is broad and dispersed, yet relatively young in its evolution (Levkoe et al., 2016). Although it is an interdisciplinary field, it has been argued that further interdisciplinary work relying on an empirical approach and with a focus on investigating everyday life is needed to develop questions and test assumptions (Wilk, 2012). A recent review chapter (De Backer, Hudders, & Fisher, 2017) about food studies, female competition, and evolutionary psychology has proposed several new lines of inquiry based on prior

AUTHOR NOTE: Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Maryanne L. Fisher, Saint Mary's University, 923 Robie Street, Halifax, NS B3H 3C3, Canada. Contact: mlfisher.99@gmail.com. +1 (902) 491-6275.

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assumptions that have not, to date, been empirically tested. This study aims to empirically test one of these previous assumptions, which is that healthy or unhealthy food choices can put a woman at risk of derogation strategies by same-sex competitors (De Backer et al., 2017, p. 750).

“You are what you eat” is a common cross-cultural principle, by which people are believed to take on the properties of the foods they eat (Stein & Nemeroff, 1995). Food not only fuels our body, but is also central to our sense of identity (Fischler, 1988). It has been argued that food intake can therefore be seen as an impression management tactic (Stein & Nemeroff, 1995). This notion refers to Goffman’s (1959) idea that everyday life can be compared to a theatre, where individuals stage themselves and (un)intentionally aim to manage the impressions they make on others. For instance, by means of food choices, individuals can manage the perceptions others will have about them (e.g. Stein & Nemeroff, 1995; Remick, 2010; Vartanian, Herman & Polivy, 2007; Vartanian 2015; Vartanian et al., 2015). Therefore, nonverbal behavior such as eating may be used to create or construct a desired, socially-projected image (Remick, 2010). Indeed, people manipulate both the types and amounts of food selected for consumption, in an attempt to control others’ impressions of them (e.g., see review by Vartanian et al., 2007; Vartanian et al., 2015).

The reason women adjust their diets, for instance by eating less, is to make a strong, favorable impression on both female and male strangers (Remick, 2010). In terms of evolutionary psychology, women are therefore adjusting their diets not only to conform to the preferences of potential mates, but also to compete more optimally against potential mating rivals (De Backer et al., 2017). The drive to control others’ impressions of oneself is to provide a means of controlling their actions, which in turn affects one’s own outcomes socially, professionally, romantically, and in other domains (Schlenker, 1980). Thus, by controlling how people perceive one’s eating behaviors, one is controlling how they are viewed as a potential mating partner and mating rival, for example.

Controlling social impressions relies on social comparison. One may attempt to match or perform better than potential mating rivals to demonstrate higher desirability and therefore, gain access to a better mate, by selecting certain kinds or amounts of food. Indeed, one’s dietary choices tend to match those within their close social circle (Higgs & Thomas, 2016), with these individuals often representing mating rivals (e.g., same-sex friends) (Bleske & Shackelford, 2001; Bleske-Recheck & Lighthall, 2010). Higgs and Thomas (2016) report that people adjust their eating tendencies to align with what they predict to be the preferences of others, thereby creating shared norms and guidelines of how one ought to behave. Thus, the norms governing what is considered appropriate eating are largely established by one’s social circle, but are also influenced by shared cultural and environmental cues (Higgs & Thomas, 2016). One of the environmental cues that triggers changes in eating habits, at least among women, is competition. Women who are paired with another woman in a competitive situation opt for lower-calorie foods (Pliner, Rizvi & Remick, 2009). From this finding and a general review of the literature that concludes social modeling not only regulates *what* women choose to eat, but also *how much* they eat in the presence of another woman, De Backer et al. (2017)

predicted that women would opt for healthier dietary choices in the presence of another woman who represents a potential rival. In addition, the researchers also proposed that, in the context of intrasexual mating competition, women would perceive other women as more or less desirable to potential mates based on their food choices, due to the idea that “you are what you eat.” In this case, what one eats then defines her reputation (De Backer et al., 2017). This concept is supported by research on the judgments people form based on a target’s food choices.

From this perspective, the relation between food choices and moral judgments is not only explained by the “you are what you eat” idea, but also one’s visible health and general halo effects (Stein & Nemeroff, 1995). The halo effect is the tendency for an impression formed about one aspect of a person (e.g., eating behaviors) to influence opinions about another aspect of that person (e.g., personality). The halo effect would occur as a result of general perceptual “spillover.” This approach postulates that a good eater will be associated with positive attributes. Specifically, someone who eats well would be viewed as healthy and weight-conscious and therefore, would make an overall good impression (Stein & Nemeroff, 1995). Eating “well” is, here again, defined both in terms of what one eats and how much is consumed.

Both smaller food portions and lighter/healthier meals are perceived as more feminine and attractive (for a review see Vartanian, Herman & Polivy, 2007). Previous studies have shown that if women eat more, they are also perceived to be: less moral, less likeable, less attractive, less feminine, fatter, and sloppier (e.g., Bock & Kanarek, 1995; Mori, Chaiken & Pliner, 1987). It was recently suggested, however, that the amount of food eaten mainly signals gender identity, with men eating more and women eating smaller portions, whereas food choice, or *what* one eats, seems to be used more as a signal of (desired) characteristics to others (Cavazza, Guidetti & Butera, 2017). Although food choice has also been linked to gender identity, with healthier foods being rated as more feminine, and “bad” foods (in terms of health value and caloric content) being seen as more masculine, there is indeed a clear link with moral judgments of one’s personality (Vartanian et al., 2007). Several studies have shown that those who eat poorly or “bad” (i.e., unhealthy, high-calorie) are perceived to be “bad” people, whereas those who eat well or “good” (i.e., healthy, low-calorie) are rated as more physically attractive, more likeable, and more moral. The latter refers to positive attributes such as being more tolerant to others, monogamous, considerate, concerned, ethical, kind-hearted, and virtuous (see review by Vartanian et al., 2007). More recently, research findings have confirmed again that people who opt for so-called bad foods, such as fast foods, are perceived to be lazy and unattractive, with the latter mediated by the fact frequent fast food consumption is a documented contributor to weight gain (Bowman & Vinyard, 2004). From this review it can be predicted that (Hypothesis 1), especially in a context of female competition (De Backer et al., 2017), women will rate other women who eat unhealthy as being the least attractive, to have the least favorable personality traits, and will perceive them as the least threatening as a rival in terms of intrasexual mating competition.

In contrast, it could be assumed that women will rate other women who eat healthy as being more attractive, and the more threatening as competitors. However, the recent literature is less conclusive about this idea, or at least there

seems to be a limit to how healthy one should eat in order to be perceived as most attractive and to have the optimal personality. People who consume *only* healthy foods and are fastidious about their consumption are often not perceived in a favorable manner. Nevin and Vartanian (2017) found that people negatively evaluated someone described as a “clean eater” as compared to someone whose diet was not mentioned, and wanted to maintain a greater social distance from them. They found those described as having orthorexia nervosa were judged even more harshly. Taken to the extreme, orthorexia nervosa is when people severely restrict their diets for health reasons to the extent that they become malnourished or have impaired daily functioning (Dunn & Bratman, 2016). Therefore, we predict that (Hypothesis 2) women will rate other women who eat a balanced diet of healthy and unhealthy foods as being most attractive, most favorable in terms of personality traits, and most threatening as competitors (the latter again following De Backer et al., 2017). We further expect (Hypothesis 3) that women will rate other women who eat only healthy foods (“clean eaters”) as less attractive and less threatening as compared to women who eat a mixture of healthy and unhealthy foods. If, and how, these “clean eaters” differ from those who clearly eat unhealthy remains to be further explored, as no study has so far compared the perception of “clean eaters” to those who consume an unhealthy diet (Research Question 1).

The present study is restricted to women for two main reasons. First, the current study aims to empirically test the theoretical assumptions about food choice and female competition that were recently put forward (De Backer, et al., 2017). Second, we include perceptions about “clean eaters,” and previous research on this topic has also focused exclusively on women (Nevin & Vartanian, 2017).

METHODS

Participants

Participants were 51 women between the ages of 19 and 67 ($M=31.22$, $SD=12.99$) who were recruited through an online posting on social media. We note that eight (~16%) of the women in our sample were over 40 years of age. We did not exclude these women, as there is no need to assume that mating competition ends with the onset of menopause. We asked about participants’ diet and exercise levels to see how distributed they were, and found approximately half (54.9%) of the participants stated they were fairly active but with potential for dietary improvement; 7.8% reported they were inactive with much room for dietary improvement, 21.6% fairly inactive with potential for dietary improvement, 13.7% fairly active with no necessary dietary improvement, and 2.0% fast-paced with no necessary dietary improvement. Education (and associated income) was not a variable of importance in this study, but due to recent work that highlights its influence on diet quality (Hiza et al., 2013), we collected these data in case the current study is used as a springboard for future investigation. We found two percent had completed some high school, 7.8% had a high school diploma, 41.2% had completed some college

or university, 29.4% had a college or university degree, 5.0% completed some postgraduate education, and 13.7% had a postgraduate degree (Master or PhD).

Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants completed general demographic information, and then moved onto the study. We employed a pre-post study design, such that all participants examined the same 12 faces and we measured changes in ratings of attractiveness, personality characteristics, and value as a mating rival due to the introduction of information of their diet (see Figure 1).

In the first phase of the study, participants were presented with 12 standardized female faces. The women in these color photographs were first-year students in the 1990s from an Ontario, Canada university, appearing to be about 20 years of age. They are wearing a black smock, are portraying a neutral facial expression, and are devoid of jewelry and eyeglasses (see Geldart, Maurer, & Henderson, 1999; Fisher, 2004). Participants were deceived in that they were informed these women were current students at the first author's university. Each face was shown individually and participants rated each target using Likert-type scales on their physical attractiveness (1 = very unattractive, 7 = very attractive), health (1 = very unhealthy, 7 = very healthy), popularity (1 = very unpopular, 7 = very popular), friendliness (1 = very unfriendly, 7 = very friendly), kindness (1 = very unkind, 7 = very kind), intelligence (1 = very unintelligent, 7 = very intelligent), laziness (1 = very lazy, 7 = very unlikely to be lazy), sloppiness (1 = very sloppy, 7 = very unlikely to be sloppy), and likeliness to beat rivals for mate (1 = would not easily beat rivals for mates, 7 = would easily beat rivals for mates).

For the second phase of the study, participants were told the following:

We surveyed the women presented in the pictures you just saw on their daily eating habits. The women were asked to log the exact foods and portion sizes they consumed within a given day (24 hour span). We were able to gather their daily food selections along with the total caloric intake corresponding to the foods consumed within that day. On average, all women consumed somewhere between 2,500 and 2,800 calories a day. In the following section, you will be asked to re-evaluate the women with respect to the information you have learned about their general eating habits.

Participants were presented with the same faces and rated each face using the same questionnaire. In this phase, however, participants were also shown images of the alleged daily diets of each target. Photographs of the food and the corresponding daily calorie count for the food consumed were presented alongside each face (see Figure 1 for examples). As stated, we attempted to hold the caloric intake relatively constant, while maintaining a reasonable amount of food consumed for the day; the caloric intake for the three diets ranged from 2,500 to 2,800 (e.g., healthy = 2,556 calories, mixture of healthy and unhealthy = 2,574, unhealthy = 2,758). Unhealthy foods tend to be higher in calories, and hence, to keep caloric

intake relatively constant across the conditions, the range was higher than what may be considered feminine or ideal (e.g., Canada's Food Guide, 2011, suggests 19-30 year-old women consume 1,900 to 2,350 depending on activity level). The selection of foods for each category was partially based on the Canada's Food Guide (2011), and with the assumption that foods that are highly processed, contain high sugar levels, or prepared as so-called fast food are unhealthy.

The study design was randomized and each of the faces was shown once to a participant in the first phase (in a random order), and again, once in the second phase. To assure that each of the 12 faces could be rated within each of the food conditions (healthy, mixture of healthy and unhealthy, and unhealthy), three versions of the study were created and administered. Each of the 12 faces differed in terms of diet across the three versions of the study (e.g., in the first version, a face would be assigned to the healthy condition, in the second version to the mixture of healthy and unhealthy condition, and in the third version to the unhealthy condition). Participants were randomly selected to complete one of the three versions. Each participant ultimately received, in a random presentation, four faces of women who had eaten a healthy diet, four that ate an unhealthy diet, and four that ate a mixture of healthy and unhealthy foods.

RESULTS

We created nine separate multivariate Repeated Measure models using the General Linear Model function in SPSS version 24. There was one model for each characteristic. The within-subject variable was the dependent variable and had three levels based on experimental condition (i.e., healthy, unhealthy, mixture of healthy and unhealthy foods). The values were the overall mean differences scores for each participant's post-minus-pre rating per characteristic per face, with the three conditions treated as the levels of the repeated variable. Therefore, there was no between-subject variable, as every participant served as their own control, allowing us to see how individuals responded based on the manipulation of diet. The main effects are presented in Table 1, while the descriptive findings (Figure 2) and results of the pairwise comparisons are presented in Table 2. Note that Bonferroni corrections for confidence intervals were used to address the issue regarding the number of pairwise comparisons.

DISCUSSION

Despite the ubiquitous nature of diet in human's daily lives, there has been seemingly no prior empirical investigation of food choice in relation to intrasexual competition for mates (De Backer et al., 2017). Results of the current study indicate that women alter their evaluations of other women's attractiveness, personality, and value as a mating rival when shown their alleged diet within the last 24 hours.

Based on the fact that both unhealthy diets (Bowman & Vinyard, 2004; Vartanian et al. 2007) and extremely healthy diets (Nevin & Vartanian, 2017) lead to

negative perceptions, we predicted women would judge females who had consumed a balanced diet of healthy and unhealthy foods to be the most attractive, healthy, intelligent, least sloppy, least lazy, and would have the easiest time beating a rival for a mate, as compared to females who ate unhealthy foods, or only healthy foods. In line with what we expected (Hypothesis 1), the women who ate unhealthy foods received the poorest ratings overall, yet contrary to our predictions (Hypothesis 2 and 3), it was not women with the balanced diet but rather those who ate only healthy foods who received the most attractive scores and were perceived as the most threatening rivals. This contradicts Nevin and Vartanian's (2017) result that women who eat only healthy foods are poorly perceived by others. We must admit, however, that in contrast to their study no vignette describing a "clean diet" was used in this current work, nor did we control for whether participants in this study perceived the women who ate only healthy foods in the past 24 hours as being "clean eaters." Perhaps a timespan of 24-hours does not yet elicit the perception of "clean eaters," which may potentially explain why our results differ from the Nevin and Vartanian (2017) study. Further work is required to determine the veracity of this claim.

We explored if, and how, the healthy diet would be perceived as compare to the unhealthy and balanced diet; we assumed that it would be viewed relatively negatively and closest to the unhealthy one (Research Question 1). Overall, the ratings for the three diet types differed significantly for all but one characteristic (i.e., kindness, see Table 1). However, in contrast to our assumption, there was overlap in ratings for several characteristics. That is, there were no significant differences between the healthy and the balanced diet *or* the unhealthy and the balanced diet for the characteristics of attractiveness, kindness, friendliness, and threat as a rival. The balanced diet showed no significant difference with the health diet for ratings of intelligence, or from the unhealthy diet for ratings of popularity. Kindness was the only variable to remain unaffected by diet, as ratings for kindness did not differ for the three diet groups. While intelligence and kindness are both argued to be trait personality characteristics (e.g., Fuhrman, Bodenhausen, & Lichtenstein, 1989), intelligence is unique in that it can be displayed and affects everyday social interactions (Murphy, 2007). Therefore, intelligence might be more readily displayed and evaluated in relation to food consumption, while kindness is not. More research is needed to determine if this possibility has merit.

The real novelty of the current study lies in the way it connects to evolutionary psychology. While there has been past work within the food studies community on how certain foods portray stereotypical femininity and masculinity, or how food intake is related to impression management (Vartanian, 2015), there appears to be no research into how women evaluate other women in terms of their worth as mating rivals, in conjunction with the amount or types of food consumed. Given that food consumption is used as a social signal (Remick, 2010), and relates directly to physical appearance via weight maintenance and attractiveness, it presumably plays a role in women's relationships with respect to how they evaluate each other in terms of intrasexual mating competition. Women often engage in intrasexual competition for mates via their appearance (Fisher, 2013 for a review), and hence, examining food related behaviors represents an intriguing new way to investigate rivalry, as was recently suggested (De Backer et al., 2017).

There are significant limitations with the current study, to the extent that we consider it a preliminary investigation. We acknowledge our sample size is relatively small and limited to women. We are currently collecting data for a follow-up, where we intend to replicate our findings reported here, and extend the study to include male participants. The focus on women in this study was driven by the recent suggestion to study food choices in the context of female competition (De Backer et al., 2017), but a future avenue of investigation must also include male stimuli to assess sex-specific intrasexual effects. Researchers need to examine perceptions of men based on their diet; although there have been some strides to understanding men's views already (e.g., Rothgerber, 2013), men remain largely neglected in this area of research (Vartanian, 2015). One particular topic of interest when studying men may be the choice to include or avoid meat in one's diet. Meat eating in particular is considered very masculine, and men may use meat to manage their reputations (see Vartanian, 2015).

In subsequent research, it would also be beneficial to incorporate participant's eating patterns, including diet and caloric intake, and participant's lifestyle, including levels of physical activity and self-perceived overall health. Such data will be used to investigate interactions with participant ratings. Level of education may also be an important contributing factor to include for the reasons listed in the Introduction section.

A further limitation is that geographical location was not controlled for in the current study, and indeed, it would be quite difficult to do so. Although many studies about food choice and perception of personality have focused on Western cultures (De Backer et al., 2017), similar results have been found, for instance in Japan (Kimura et al., 2009), and more recently also in Turkey, which also has a very different cultural background as compared to Europe, the USA and the Far East (Basfirinci & Cilingir, 2017). It can be assumed that the processes described and tested in this study may translate to other cultures, but it would be beneficial to further test this possibility empirically in future research. We therefore suggest future research not only include parameters of the cultural background of participants in their study design, but to also focus on including more non-Western participants.

Finally, in addition to looking at previously researched perceptions of physical attractiveness and personality, this study also included a measure of perceived threat as a potential mating rival. Future research could include more cues of perceived intrasexual competition, for instance by focusing on perceived levels of jealousy towards women who eat less or more healthy. Or, as De Backer et al. (2017) suggested, it may also be worthwhile to determine whether food choices are used in derogation strategies, such as through the use of gossip. Will women (and men) gossip about their perceived rivals' food choices and dietary habits?

The integration of evolutionary psychology with food studies represents a relatively novel and important development. Here we examine how women's alleged consumption of healthy, unhealthy, or a mixture of healthy and unhealthy foods influences how they are evaluated with respect to attractiveness, personality characteristics, and value as a mating rival by other women. Our results suggest that initial baseline ratings of attractiveness, personality characteristics, and potential value as a rival do change when diet becomes a factor upon which judgments are formed.

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APPENDIX A

Figure 1

Diet Conditions with Sample Foods



Note. These foods accompanied faces to represent the healthy, mixture of healthy and unhealthy, and unhealthy food conditions. The healthy condition had an approximate caloric intake of 2,556, mixture had 2,574, and unhealthy had 2,758. The female face appeared to the left, in color. We do not hold the model releases to permit us to publish the faces, but details may be found at Geldart, Maurer, and Henderson (1999) and Fisher (2004).

APPENDIX B

Table 1

Results of Repeated-Measures MANOVA for Food Condition on Attractiveness, Personality Characteristics, and Value as a Mating Rival

Characteristic	<i>F</i>	<i>dfs</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>n_p</i>
Attractiveness	6.93	2, 48	.002	.22
Healthy	55.84	2, 48	<.001	.70
Popular	4.85	2, 48	.012	.17
Friendly	4.81	2, 47	.013	.17
Kind	1.73	2, 48	.19	.07
Intelligent	16.65	2, 48	< .001	.41
Lazy	26.57	2, 48	< .001	.53
Sloppy	23.29	2, 48	< .001	.49
Rivalry	7.82	2, 48	.001	.25

APPENDIX C

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Pairwise Comparisons for Food Conditions

Characteristic	Condition	M_{dif}	SD	Pairwise comparison
Attractiveness	Healthy	.24	.60	Healthy>Unhealthy, $p<.001$
	Mixture	.03	.64	Healthy and Mixture, $p=.12$
	Unhealthy	-.25	.65	Mixture and Unhealthy, $p=.07$
Healthy	Healthy	1.18	1.16	Healthy>Unhealthy, $p<.001$
	Mixture	-.28	.89	Healthy>Mixture, $p<.001$
	Unhealthy	-1.76	1.31	Mixture>Unhealthy, $p<.001$
Popular	Healthy	.38	.71	Healthy>Unhealthy, $p=.014$
	Mixture	.03	.63	Healthy>Mixture, $p=.032$
	Unhealthy	-.085	.77	Mixture and Unhealthy, $p=1.00$
Friendly	Healthy	.32	.62	Healthy>Unhealthy, $p=.01$
	Mixture	.051	.61	Healthy and Mixture, $p=.06$
	Unhealthy	-.049	.55	Mixture and Unhealthy, $p=.88$
Kind	Healthy	.11	.55	Healthy and Unhealthy, $p=.21$
	Mixture	.015	.52	Healthy and Mixture, $p=1.00$
	Unhealthy	-.13	.60	Mixture and Unhealthy, $p=.50$
Intelligent	Healthy	.29	.62	Healthy>Unhealthy, $p<.001$
	Mixture	.035	.68	Healthy and Mixture, $p=.24$
	Unhealthy	-.41	.63	Mixture>Unhealthy, $p<.001$
Lazy	Healthy	.94	.90	Healthy>Unhealthy, $p<.001$
	Mixture	-.027	.65	Healthy>Mixture, $p<.001$
	Unhealthy	-.83	1.00	Mixture>Unhealthy, $p<.001$
Sloppy	Healthy	.87	.86	Healthy>Unhealthy, $p<.001$
	Mixture	.03	.59	Healthy>Mixture, $p<.001$
	Unhealthy	-.69	.93	Mixture>Unhealthy, $p<.001$
Rivalry	Healthy	.28	.63	Healthy>Unhealthy, $p=.001$
	Mixture	-.028	.77	Healthy and Mixture, $p=.09$
	Unhealthy	-.32	.78	Mixture and Unhealthy, $p=.12$

APPENDIX D

Figure 2

Mean Differences in Post-Minus-Pre Ratings as Influenced by Food Consumption

