

The Reflective Journal: How Does Food Consumption Affect Us?

Ying Wang¹

¹ Sichuan University Jinjiang College, Meishan, Sichuan, China

Correspondence: Ying Wang, Sichuan University Jinjiang College, Meishan 620860, Sichuan, China.

Received: June 1, 2022

Accepted: July 3, 2022

Online Published: September 6, 2022

doi:10.20849/jess.v5i2.1284

URL: <https://doi.org/10.20849/jess.v5i2.1284>

Abstract

Taking the author's experience as an example, this research tries to discuss the possible connection and relationships between food consumption with our attitude, behaviour, personality, psychology, emotion and social identity, and therefore to reflect on how food affects our daily life.

Keywords: food consumption, environmental behaviour, sustainability

1. Food Consumption and Attitudes

As Pothukuchi and Kaufman (1999) point out that city individuals hardly notice the food system. I also had never thought about what food could be before it arrives at supermarkets. As I almost did not cook and buy anything from local farmer's markets before I study in the UK, I took food for granted, thinking it should be what my families cooked and restaurants served. I cared more about what the food tasted and looked like on the table, but never pondered over what the condition of it was before cooked. I did have chance to talk to local farmers and visited their houses, but seldom communicated with them about what they planted in detail. I did care about animals and plants but never thought about the welfare of farming animals. Living in the UK for the first couple months, even though I had to buy and cooked food by myself, I paid more attention to the price than how the food was produced.

However, the lecture which I attended about food security last year started changing my attitudes and behaviour. Especially when I read some articles about animals' emotional life, I was triggered off the compassion with them. Among them, Miele (2011) asserts that farming animals' happiness can be measured and then presented in marketing messages. Since then, every time when I choose eggs and chickens, I read the tags carefully. I also realize that happy chicken can lay happy eggs, and happy eggs can make me physically healthier and mentally happier. In my country, people hold that unhappiness can induce a kind of poison in animals' bodies, when people eat them, they would absorb it also. To be honest, I admit that this idea helps me mind what the farming animals' living and mental conditions are.

In addition, Walsh (2013) writes that livestock production has a significant impact on global environmental damages, and one in three of the world's land is utilized to support farming animals. What he said made me feel a little bit guilty, because, as an omnivore, I used to spend more money on meat than other kinds of food. In a lecture, we were showed the videos about some industrialized farming in some countries, where pigs and cows were caged separately in specifically position. That made feel uncomfortable and sick. For the next several days, my mind had been surrounded by their miserable life of coldness, no freedom and expelling from nature. I could not stand their suffering. I believe that the less we eat meat the less population of them would suffer. Since it is difficult for me to know the animals' real living condition only from the tags, so I have to guess maybe what I buy is from an industrialized farming factory and I have been trying to eat less meat and more vegetables since then. Maybe I would transfer to a vegetarian in the future, but now I try to eat as less meat as possible.

The first week of this February, I sorted out my refrigerator and found that there were three packages of meat which were out of date. Then I had to throw them out. Morgan and Sonnio (2010) warn us that 30% of people in the world are food insecure, and some of them are suffering of malnutrition. I feel responsible that I need to do something personally. Now I decided that I buy food every time just for one day or two days' need, rather than for a week. Before picking up the food, I always ask myself questions: 'Do I really need this? Can I finish them within two days? If I don't like it, whom I could give?'

Sanne (2002, p.276) argues that "consumption is not a signal to the world but to own mind". Yes, I agree to this view. Our behaviour and consumption, to a large extent, reflect our personal value, appreciation and our

worldview. When we buy something, we exhibit what we are thinking. We choose what we believe right for us and right for the society, unwittingly or intentionally. Our consumption behaviour influences our physical condition and even some times our mental condition, which, conversely, influence our consumption recognition and decision.

2. Food Consumption and Behaviours

As Gutjar (2014) mentions, our food choice is influenced by both our sense and the packages. When I went to market, I usually focused on the pictures on the packages and tried to imagine the taste the food inside would be like, especially for instant food which I completely chose based on what the packages look like. If they were tempting, I would definitely choose them. Basically, my decision to choose food depended on whether the pictures triggered my appetite. The more colourful the pictures were, the more my desire to purchase was. So, my food consumption was totally guided by the advertising on the food packages.

Silayoi & Speece (2004) believe that it is because of package s' aesthetic value to affect consumer choices. I paid the price for the appreciation of this aesthetic value. I sometimes felt disappointed after tasting the bad food I chosen. The disappoint was that the inside contents were not as same as the pictures showed, and also most tasted not as good as what I thought and imagined. The feeling of being cheated was so strong that I swore every time that I would not believe advertising after bad experiences. I persuaded myself to change myself at this point. Although Hardeman et al. (2002) say that the main determinant of behaviour is the intention to act, and the intention is influenced by the attitude towards the behaviour. As for me, it might be easy to change my attitudes. But it is not easy to change my behaviours. I could not choose the bad food I had tasted before, but for the new one I still inevitably choose it according to what it looks like on the package. This is just as same as what Dalenberg et al. (2014) states that choosing what to eat and drink is controlled by a fast intuitive process rather than a slow reasoning process.

I have kept asking myself, why I could not control my behaviour and make the decisions more rational. Do I allow my behaviour to dominate me rather than let my mind to do so? Why am I tolerated with being controlled by my intuitive impulse rather than by logical sense? In order to show that I am a rational consumer, I have tried to read more information of food packages rather than just focusing on the vivid pictures recently. At first, I paid more attention to the ingredients on the labels, checking whether the food was healthy compared to the alternatives. However, healthy food does not mean good taste. Taste directs our food choice generally (Urala & Lähteenmäki 2003). Even for healthy foods, taste expectations and experiences are critical factors when customers select this food category (Tuorila & Cardello 2002). It is hard for me to ignore the advertising pictures which I could imagine the possible tastes. Tastes always matter to me. Sometimes they are more important to healthy factors.

However, it does not mean that I still let my intuition guide my purchase complete now. There are always some debates and struggles in my mind about which one should be singled out when I am in a market. The fight never stops. But I try to find a balance between the desire for tasteful food and the goodness for physical health which is important for my life. Sometimes I need to pamper myself, giving taste priority. However, I should always put healthy food at the first, as I need to enjoy my life based on a healthy constitution. Now I give up changing myself. I admit and accept what I am and determine not to push myself too much. Let everything happen like it should be. After I started to stop criticizing myself and be who I am, I feel more comfortable in a market and do not connect my consumption behaviours with my level of intelligence and judgement. I stop doubting myself and feel more confident with my life and myself.

3. Food Consumption and Personality

Our dietary behaviour and food choosing preference are influenced not only our culture and customs but also our personality and social recognition. For example, I noticed that in our course some students who are shy and introvert preferred high oily food with much meat when we ate out once, while some students who are open and out-going chose balanced food with meat and vegetables. MacNicol et al. (2003, p.1754) explains that "*the trait of openness was a predictor of a range of dietary behaviour including general healthy practices, fibre consumption and avoidance of meat fats*". I understood that confident and extrovert people might be better at finding the balance of their life, which could also influence their dietary behaviour; while unconfident and introvert people might be lack of a kind of ability to facing rightly their shortcomings and then tend to magnify their flaws unnecessarily, which might lead them to be a little bit partial towards their life and hence influence their choice.

However, I realized later that what I thought is quite partial after I talked to one of my friends who is quiet and introvert person. She is vegetarian and she cares about animals' wellbeing. She told me that she refused eating

meat because eating meat brings mental pains for her as meat on a plate gave her a vivid imagine of what farming animal suffer from feeding and slaughter. She also mentioned that too much oil on food maked her feel physically uncomfortable. She thinks that all of this reflect her personality of imagination, consciousness and reflection, which is quite as same as the finding of the Goldberg and Strycker's (2002). They find that people who prefer low-fat food describe themselves in terms that reflect dutifulness, orderliness and conscientiousness; individuals who avoid meat fats describe themselves in ways that reflect imagination and reflection.

While another friend of mine also have different opinions about what I thought. She is also introvert. She said sometimes she is quite impulsive when ordering food. She is prone to be governed by her emotion or mood. She sometimes would just eat meat for one whole day, or may just cook vegetables for another day without any meat at all. I guess that this reflects her as a girl with moodiness, quickness, alertness and purposefulness. Although she slightly disagreed with my views but did not deny it completely. Another trait which she also demonstrates from her dietary behaviour is impulsiveness. Evenden (1999) defines impulsivity as acting without thinking and seeking out excitement, which links to the lack of perseverance and negative emotions (Murphy et al. 2014).

As Keane and Willets (1994) contends that why individuals eat and what they eat are not just simply for nutritional value. In my opinion it is also not just for living. What they choose could be a reflection of their personality, and why they choose could be a mirror of their views and attitudes towards their life and this world. Yes, this is a complicated world and people's personality can hardly be described simply through one aspect of their behaviours. However, their behaviours reflect, more or less, a part of their personality. Food consumption, as one of the human's most important practices in this world, is not only just a practical choice but also an embodiment of self-value and social recognition.

4. Food Consumption and Psychology

Consumers show high variability in food choice behaviour. The motivators influencing this type of choice behaviour are complex and include psychological characteristics (Hardeman et al. 2000). When I feel happy, I usually buy a lot of snacks and food and am willing to spend more time on cooking. I could spend a whole morning on just one dish. However, when I am depressed, I definitely do not like wasting my time on cooking and even on some extremely occasion do not eat anything for a whole day. When I feel exciting, I sometimes invite my friends to eat out and share my happiness with them. So, to some extent, what I eat and how I eat are indicators of my mood and emotions.

In addition, I sometimes also show a little bit extreme trend that when I fond of a kind of food I would eat it every day until I am fed up with it. Then I would never touch it again. This kind of bipolar behaviour always makes my friend astonished. I also feel confused myself sometimes. For me white is white, black is black, there is no grey between them. I guess this may show my immaturity. Sometimes I also refuse to try some new food which I have never tasted before or there are no pictures on the package available for me to imagine it. New food, for me, is just like an isolated and unexploited land where is full of unknown and mysterious creatures. As Tan & Holub (2012) contend, one of our traits that has been specifically related to food choice is food neophobia, which Pliner and Hobden (1992) defined as the extent to which people are reluctant to try novel foods (food products, dishes, cuisines). Not everyone feels confident in front of novelty. Neophobia, I believe, reflects our sense of insecurity and fear towards unknown things. It shows our inside weakness and lack of confidence.

Another reason for neophobia might is that some people could not accept bad consequence of their choice and behaviour. They hope to prove that every decision they made is right and rational based on their good judgement and intelligence. Some people don't want others to regard them as stupid people without proper ability to balance their life. For example, when a woman bought a sort of new food and if her husband did not like it, she probably felt guilty for spoiling her husband's appetite and wasting money, feeling afraid of some possible judgements from her husband. Therefore, next time she would not take the same risk to try new one. This kind of fear of making mistakes is quite common in our society as everyone wants to be perfect and does not want their ability to be doubted. In these people's eyes, every action they take has some meaning and reflects themselves who they are. So, they do not accept there are something wrong with their decision which, they believe, should be made based on right judgement. If they have not experienced or have not enough confidence on the food, they would rather give up it no matter how tempting it is. I sometimes feel that I might be one of this kind of people. Of course, I would not accept it in front of others.

5. Food Consumption and Emotions

Last month one of tutors in Environmental behavior module played a piece of video about farming animal feeding within an industrialized factory. It was a horrible scene. The pigs were constrained within barriers and their only exercise was to move their mouths. It is sad that their existence of this world is to be eaten, and they

live for death. The purpose of being fed is to be killed and the reason of being cared is to be swallowed. What do they have suffered psychologically and physically? Human can hardly imagine that. Only those who could feel their pain can make a conscious choice when they are picking up meat in a market. Our views to other animals and the world have important effect on our consumption behaviours. There is a connection between our spirit consciousness and physical reaction (Ciaramella 2013). The imagination of farming animal suffering can trigger some people's sickness of stomach. Therefore, this influences our decision on whether kind of food we should choose when we go shopping.

In the fourth century BC, the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi said that compassion should permeate relations not only between humans but also between all sentient beings. He believes that human, animals, nature are integrated. There is a law between them which governs the world. Human and animals are equal. One of my friends who is vegetarian stopped eating meat when she was a teenager. She cares about animals and cannot bear eating any meat. She is empathy and she said she can feel animal's feelings when she stays with them. She believes that animals and human are same, as animals also have feelings and their languages. The only difference is that they have different physical shapes. As Wolfe (2010) says, both human and nonhuman animals share the physical processes of aging, decline, and death. *"This joint focus allows for a more serious consideration of nonhuman animals subjects founded on common vulnerabilities of the body and bodily suffering."* (Irvine et al. 2012, p.31). The human's ability of empathy makes them feel guilty when they choose meat which is fed or processed inhumanly.

The same thing also happens for some people when they choose which kind of vegetables to eat. I never accept to eat flowers and any other plants which are wild or are planted for us to enjoy and decorate. I hold that they are beauty and blossom for appreciation. They are essence of this world and represent nature, which makes them have souls. It is impossible for me to eat any wild plants, as they are planted by nature and we do not have the right to take them away. Only nature can do that. They come from nature and should return to nature. I do believe that every plant has its life. We know less about this world. We judge the world with our own morality and value. Because we cannot sense plants' feeling, we think that they are lifeless. We can never understand them except we become a plant. Actually, I believe that they have a different way to feel pain and happiness which is different from human's way. With these views, I also cannot accept drink Chinese tea with flowers and take Chinese medicine made of wild plants, as even though I do not eat them but they die because of my consumption.

6. Food Consumption and Social Identity

In my hometown dinner is a most important occasion for people to communicate and connect people with share interests. As Eertmans et al. (2005) states, our dietary patterns are not only determined by food itself, but also by individual and social factors. They are related to knowledge, specific preferences, health status, religion, social status, social norms and cultural background (Milosevic et al. 2011). Where we choose to eat and what we order in restaurants are reflection of our value, social identity and self-recognition. For example, an elegant lady goes to a nice Chinese restaurant. She would order a dish of sliced pork with vegetables, and would not like a giant plate of pork leg. As the latter is not suitable for what she recognizes herself. A shabby restaurant or fast-food bar cannot be accepted for her. Its noisy and obvious food odour are out of tune with her. Only soft music and exquisite food are fit for her nice dress and elegant gesture. The most important is not what she eats but how she eats. She consumes both food and the eating environment, which makes her comfortable with who she is.

When making dietary choices, people regard food as a means of satisfying different needs, other than just nutrition. Fürst (1997, p.441) contends that *"food is an important expression of identity"*. The food for a gathering of friends or families is different from that for a business meeting. The former pays more attention to what are their favourites, and also the cost will be considered. However, the latter would value more whether the food is exquisite and posh, and the cost would be less important. The former think about they should be happy with the food, while the latter worry about how the guests judge the host through the food provided. With the different consideration, the choice for different places will be completely different. Obviously, the place chosen is relevant to what kinds of food it can serve. So, both the place and the food are the reflection of people's social identity and self-recognition. As when they consume there, their dress code, languages and gestures should blend into the eating environment. All of this show who they are and which level they are in the society.

Fürst (1997) construes that as women are more involved in domestic food work they influence the style and culture of food consumption in families. As a result, a wife's taste for food determines the families, and even influences her children. My grandmother always likes food with simple ingredients and light taste. So does my mother and me. My granny's philosophy about food heavily influences us. She believes we need to eat food's

original taste which is healthy for us. She also thinks that the taste of original is blessed by God and no one has right to refuse God's blessing. When we cook and eat like this way we are mixed with God. All of this show that where we are from and who we are. My great grandfather had worshipped the God of kitchen every night after the dinner to thank him giving us food and enjoyment. When I was young, I felt his behaviour was so mysterious and awesome. He always scolded us when we wasted food as he believed that we spoiled the god's love. I had never realized what it meant until one day when I knew more about our customs and group recognition. I have gradually sensed the group emotion and become a part of it. In my hometown, each thing is related to food. We worship our ancestors with food. We celebrate festivals with food. When a baby is born or someone dies or a couple have a wedding, we gather together with food. When someone leaves or comes back home, special food also is prepared. Food is a significant part of our life. It shows how we live and why we live. It explains some aspects of our lives, some of them we may even not realize ourselves. It sinks into both our physical bodies and spiritual souls.

References

- Ciaramella, A., Micco, P., Brandolese, L., Paroli, M., & Rossi, S. (2013). Somatisation and traumatic life events: the relevance of dysfunction of autobiographical memory. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 74*(6), 540-541.
- Dalenberg, J., Gutjar, S., Horst, G., Graaf, K., Renken, R., & Jager, G. (2014). Evoked Emotions Predict Food Choice[Online]. *Plos one, 9*(12), e115388. Retrieved May 4th 2019, from <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0115388>
- Eertmans, A., Victoir, A., Vansant, G., & Van den Bergh, O. (2005). Food-related personality traits, food choice motives and food intake. Mediator and moderator relationships. *Food Quality and Preference, 16*, 714-726.
- Evenden, J. L. (1999). Varieties of impulsivity. *Psychopharmacology, 146*(4), 348-361.
- Fürst, E. L. (1997). Cooking and femininity. *Women's Studies International Forum, 20*(3), 441-449.
- Goldberg, L. R., & Strycker, L. A. (2002). Personality traits and eating habits: the assessment of food preferences in a large community sample. *Personality and Individual Differences, 32*, 49-65.
- Gutjar, S., Graaf, C., Palascha, A., & Jager, G. (2014). Food choice: The battle between package, taste and consumption situation. *Appetite, 80*, 109-113.
- Hardeman, W., Griffin, S., Johnston, M., Kinmonth, A., & Wareham, N. (2000). Interventions to prevent weight gain: a systematic review of psychological models and behaviour change methods. *International Journal of Obesity, 24*, 131-143.
- Hardeman, W., Johnston, M., Johnston, D., Bonetti, D., Wareham, N., & Kinmonth, A. (2002). Application of the Theory of Planned Behaviour in Behaviour Change Interventions: A Systematic Review. *Psychology & Health, 17*(2), 123-158.
- Irvine, R., Degeling, C., & Kerridge, I. (2012). Uncanny animals: thinking differently about ethics and the animal-human relationship. *The American Journal of Bioethics, 12*, 30-32.
- Keane, A., & Willets, A. (1994). Factors that affect food choice. *Nutrition and Food Sciences, 105*, 15-17.
- MacNicol, S. A. M., Murray, S. M., & Austin, E. J. (2003). Relationships between personality, attitudes and dietary behaviour in a group of Scottish adolescents. *Personality and Individual Differences, 35*, 1753-1764.
- Miele, M. (2011). The taste of happiness: free-range chicken. *Environment and Planning, 43*, 2076-2090.
- Milosevic, J., Zezelj, I., Gorton, M., & Barjolle, D. (2011). Understanding the motives for food choice in Western Balkan Countries. *Appetite, 58*(1), 205-214.
- Milosevic, J., Zezelj, I., Gorton, M., & Barjolle, D. Understanding the motives for food choice in western Balkan countries. *Appetite, 58*, 205-214.
- Morgan, K., & Sonnino, R. (2010). The urban foodscape: world cities and the new food equation. *Cambridge Journal of Regional, Economy and Society, 3*, 209-224.
- Murphy, C. M., Stojek, M. K., & MacKillop, J. (2014). Interrelationships among impulsive personality traits, food addiction, and body mass index. *Appetite, 73*, 45-60.
- Pliner, P., & Hobden, K. (1992). Development of a scale to measure the trait of food neophobia in humans. *Appetite, 19*, 105-120.
- Pothukuchi, K., & Kaufman, J. (1998). Placing the food on the urban agenda: The role of municipal institutions

- in food systems planning. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 16(2), 213-224.
- Sanne, C. (2002). Willing consumers-or locked-in? Policies for a sustainable consumption. *Ecological Economics*, 42, 273-287.
- Silayoi, P., & Speece, M. (2004). Packaging and Purchase Decisions. An Exploratory Study on the Impact of Involvement Level and Time Pressure. *British Food Journal*, 106(8), 607-628.
- Tan, C., & Holub, S. (2012). Maternal feeding practices associated with food neophobia. *Appetite*, 59(2), 483-487.
- Tuorila, H., & Cardello, A. V. (2002). Consumer response to an off-flavour in juice in the presence of specific health claims. *Food Quality and Preference*, 13, 561-569.
- Urala, N., & Lähteenmäki, L. (2003). Reasons behind consumers' functional food choices. *Nutrition and Food Science*, 33, 148-158.
- Walsh, B. (2013). The Triple Whopper Environmental Impact of Global Meat Production. *www.time.com*. Dec. 16, 2013. Retrieved 26 February 2019, from <http://science.time.com/2013/12/16/the-triple-whopper-environmental-impact-of-global-meat-production/>
- Wolfe, C. (2010). *What is posthumanism?*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).