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You Are What You Eat: Why Do Male Consumers Avoid Vegetarian Options?



Journals Division

Why are men generally more reluctant to try vegetarian products? According to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#), consumers are influenced by a strong association of meat with masculinity.

“We examined whether people in Western cultures have a metaphoric link between meat and men,” write authors Paul Rozin (University of Pennsylvania), Julia M. Holmes (Louisiana State University), Myles S. Faith (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), and Brian Wansink (Cornell University). The answer, they found, was a strong connection between eating meat—especially muscle meat, like steak—and masculinity.

In a number of experiments that looked at metaphors and certain foods, like meat and milk, the authors found that people rated meat as more masculine than vegetables. They also found that meat generated more masculine words when people discussed it, and that people viewed male meat eaters as being more masculine than non-meat eaters.

Most of the studies took place in the United States and Britain, but the authors also analyzed 23 languages that use gendered pronouns. They discovered that across most languages, meat was related to the male gender.

“To the strong, traditional, macho, bicep-flexing, All-American male, red meat is a strong, traditional, macho, bicep-flexing, All-American food,” the authors write. “Soy is not. To eat it, they would have to give up a food they saw as strong and powerful like themselves for a food they saw as weak and wimpy.”

If marketers or health advocates want to counteract such powerful associations, they need to address the metaphors that shape consumer attitudes, the authors explain. For example, an education campaign that urges people to eat more soy or vegetables would be a tough sell, but reshaping soy burgers to make them resemble beef or giving them grill marks might help cautious men make the transition.

“In marketing, understanding the metaphor a consumer might have for a brand could move the art of positioning toward more of a science,” the authors conclude.

Paul Rozin, Julia M. Holmes, Myles S. Faith, and Brian Wansink. “Is Meat Male? A Quantitative Multi-Method Framework to Establish Metaphoric Relationships.”

Journal of Consumer Research: October 2012. For more information, contact Paul Rozin (rozin@psych.upenn.edu) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.

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