

‘Manly’ Plates: Generation Z and the Rhetoric of Vegan Men

Erin Trauth

Despite a worldwide growth of vegan diets and a seemingly expanded acceptance of these lifestyles in many mainstream cultures, vegan diets are still often seen as part of a woman’s lifestyle and are often expressed in vastly female gendered rhetorical spaces. It has been noted in sociological and food studies spaces that, despite advances in extricating gendered cultural norms as they relate to household responsibilities related to food, a strong association between meat consumption and masculinity still prevails (Nath, 2011; Sumpter, 2015). While many proponents of a vegan diet work to untangle this association, some theorize that even modern pro-vegan rhetoric often serve to reinforce rather than challenge these gendered relationships to meat consumption (Hart, 2018). When we consider the potential health benefits of adopting a vegan diet – including reduced risks for diabetes, heart disease, and many cancers (Mayo Clinic, 2019) – the notion that some men might forgo this adoption because the prevailing rhetoric tells him he is ‘less of a man’ for doing so is deeply troubling. Further, in consideration of the fact that many insurance companies now reward plant-based or vegan eating, and many doctors across the United States are prescribing such diets to patients in an attempt to help control or prevent an array of diseases (Mayo Clinic, 2019), it is even more important to gain an understanding of how male eaters are being impacted by the prevailing rhetoric of veganism directed at their subgroup.

Some posit, however, that this trend is finally changing – especially as Generation Z (those born between 1995 and 2010) enters adulthood and influences food buying habits – and, subsequently, the norms and rhetoric associated with food consumption. According to research conducted by Barclays in 2017, Generation Z is buying 57 percent more tofu and 550 percent more plant-based milk compared to previous generations. However, Millennials also have seemingly bought more into ‘healthier’ food choices as compared to Baby Boomers (Yale, 2018) – and, even still, an abundance of ‘meat is manly’ rhetoric persists in mainstream vernacular today – from fast food advertisements in men’s magazines proclaiming that ‘friends don’t let friends eat tofu’ to laugh-track-backed sitcom jokes degrading men eating vegan meats at a barbeque.

In this paper, I investigate the prevailing attitudes and gendered constructs related to vegan diets of Generation Z men. I explore this sample’s dietary habits, the constructs and health-related behaviors they associate with vegan diets, their reactions to contemporary, obstinate gendered messages about meat consumption, and examples of discouragement they may have received related to gendered

norms connected with vegan diets. This paper ends with a discussion of the future of vegan lifestyle adoption and the rhetoric of vegan men as illustrated by the habits, attitudes, and nutrition-related health status of Generation Z men. These findings will illuminate future trends about men opting for a vegan diet and the rhetoric surrounding vegan men, further informing how vegan foods may – or may not – be used as medicine for this sample group in the future. The results of this study will add to a growing discourse of food studies scholarship focused on the intersections of rhetoric and gender, adding to multiple conversations ongoing in these fields of study.

Generation Z: What Shall We Eat Tomorrow?

Though exact timeframes vary slightly, most researchers have defined Generation Z (or Gen Z) as those born between mid-to-late 1990s and the early-to-mid 2010 years. Most experts mark either 1995, 1996, or 1997 as the Gen Z inaugural birth year. Some of the primary defining characteristics about this group, whose members have, generally, not known a world without an array of wireless technologies and wide access to information via the internet, include individuality, skepticism, connectedness, and an ability to embrace change (Miller, 2018). Members of this group are also known to be financially focused, having observed the mistakes of generations past, and they seem to view work as just that: work. Miller, a member of Gen Z himself, writes: ‘We are realists and pragmatists who view work primarily as a way to make a living rather than as the main source of meaning and purpose in our lives’ (par.18). They are also ranked as the most informed generation, which is likely tied to the abundance of information this generation can find at its fingertips through a constant feed from various devices. With a grasp on information, Gen Z members also have a tendency to become involved in social and political issues of consequence. Miller writes:

The chaos and unrest in our political system have inspired us to want to get involved and make a difference. Regardless of which side of the aisle we are on, most of us are informed and passionate about the issues facing our society today. Social media allows us to have a voice in our political system even before we can vote. This opportunity has forced us to develop critical-thinking and reasoning skills as we engage in sophisticated debates about important issues that might not even affect us yet (par.36–38).

In this article, Paul Carney, a human resources researcher, notes that members of Gen Z are generally adaptable to change. 'Gen Z has a strong ability to adapt to change. For those of us who have spanned many decades in the workplace, we have seen the rate of change increase and it makes most of us uncomfortable. Gen Z are the people who will help all of us adapt better'.

When we consider how Gen Z differs from Millennial, the generation directly preceding them, some research has shown that Gen Z's opinions on social and political issues are not incredibly different: similar in many ways to the Millennial group, Gen Z members have grown up comfortable with diversity, tend to lean liberally, and demonstrate an ability to welcome emergent social trends (PEW Research Center, 2019). When considering issues about climate change, 54 percent of Gen Z attribute the Earth's warming trend to human activity – this is a higher rate than Gen X, Boomer, or Silent generations, who attribute climate change more often to natural patterns (PEW Research Center, 2019).

As it relates to gender, Gen Z exhibits an awareness and openness about changing gender norms. More than a third – 35 percent – of Gen Z members know someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns. Further, nearly 60 percent of Gen Z members 'say forms or online profiles that ask about a person's gender should include options other than "man" or "woman"' (PEW Research Center, 2019).

The aforementioned profile of Gen Z is important to consider because it paints the picture of a person with realist but liberal-leaning viewpoints. It poses a profile is a person who is open, connected, and passionate about a range of issues. As such, we might imagine the Gen Z man as one who is largely unfazed by gender constructs, or is at least comfortable and flexible on these constructs. However, when it comes to notions of gender expectations as they relate to diet, it seems some diets and choices are still considered more feminine. A 2018 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey shows that men still eat 57 percent more meat than women (Centers for Disease Control, 2018). Gen Z, as a whole, seems to be making more frequent plant-based food choices, sometimes at astounding rates: Generation Z is buying 57 percent more tofu and 550 percent more plant-based milk compared to previous generations. However, Millennials also show a tendency to adopt more frequent plant-based dietary choices, and much of the 'men eat meat' rhetoric still circulates in mainstream society, particularly in media sources. So, then: will Gen Z be the generation that shatters the persistent gender constructs surrounding vegan foods? Will the general openness and informed nature of this generation change what it means to have a 'manly' plate, tearing down the walls which still make some men embarrassed to bring tofu burgers to a tailgate party? As it relates to Gen Z men around the world, I pose the question: What shall we eat tomorrow?

Men and Meat: A Lingering Love Story

Despite many advances in the availability and acceptance of plant-based options worldwide, a rhetoric surrounding men and the need for meat to be strong prevails in many settings. In 'Men, Meat, and Hegemonic Identity: Veganism and the Discourse of Masculinity,' Laura Wright (2015) explores the 'male activity of eating meat,' a 'profound denunciation of vegetarian and vegan diets as indicators of weakness, ethnicity, and femininity' still prevails in many cultures (p.114). A 2018 *Frontier in Psychology* study showed men more often associate meat with health and also power: 'Men exhibited stronger implicit associations between meat and healthiness than did women. As 'healthy' was operationalized in the current study using terms such as 'virile' and 'powerful,' this suggests that a meat-strength/power association may mediate the meat-masculinity link readily observed across western cultures' (p.559). In this study, men were also showed a more positive disposition and a stronger attention bias to meat than women participants (p.559).

Joop de Boer, a researcher at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, writes that meat is largely tied to masculinity and thus power: '...traditional framings of masculinity, emphasizing that 'real men' eat meat, are associated with the men's preferences for large meat portions and almost no willingness to reduce. Eating large meat portions is a marker of masculinity, which reflects traditional, patriarchal notions of power and performance' (de Boer qtd. in Brisette, 2017).

When we consider the potential benefits of a plant-based diet, or a diet that incorporates less meat and more plant-based items, it is easy to see how such associations can put men at a disadvantage. If it will embarrass or threaten a man's masculinity to choose a plant-based option when in the company of others – or even just when shopping for food items at a grocery store – it is likely less probable that a man will make a healthier choice. In 2016, a Health and Human Services and United States Department of Agriculture report urged men in particular to eat less meat and animal products, stating: 'Some individuals, especially teen boys and adult men, also need to reduce overall intake of protein foods by decreasing intakes of meats, poultry and eggs and increasing amounts of vegetables or other under consumed food groups' (HHS and USDA, 2016). However, de Boer explains that those who view traditional gender characteristics as less mutually exclusive might not as often make food choices based on a set of gender norms. This is where Gen Z may exhibit differentiation, or perhaps where they may begin to carve a path for change.

Gen Z: Turning Tables (and Changing Plates)

Across the world, the rhetoric surrounding plant-based diets is slowly changing. One hundred-percent vegan 'burgers' such as the Impossible Burger and Beyond Meat Burger are surging in popularity and demand. Fast food outlets such as

Dunkin Donuts, Burger King, and White Castle are even offering many of these options in a variety of options. And media offerings, such as the 2019 documentary *The Game Changers*, which focuses on the benefits of plant-based diets for athletes and, in particular, males, are helping to turn the tables on the way we talk about vegan diets and those who choose them. And the numbers are showing slow but incremental change. In a recent shopping comparison survey, a whopping 35 percent of Gen Z respondents said they wanted to remove meat from their diet entirely 2021, compared to 32 percent of Millennials (Impossible Foods Insights, 2019). Further, linking to the aforementioned attitudes about climate change and the role of human activity, a 2016 study found that 77 percent of Gen Z members value sustainability and 82 percent are willing to spend more money on food products that do not harm the environment; this compares to only 54 percent of Millennials stating the same (Impossible Foods Insights, 2019). Recent research by Aramark found that 79 percent of Gen Z members wish to go meatless at least once or twice a week, 65 percent want to have a more plant-based diet, and 60 percent want to reduce meat consumption altogether (p.1).

While these numbers show cause for hope, the gendered attitudes about men and meat still permeate society – ranging from ads claiming men should ‘eat like a man – not like a rabbit’ (Weight Watchers – Figure 1) to ‘real men just laugh at quiche’ (The Keg – Figure 2) to ‘man up’ (Carl’s Jr./Hardee’s – Figure 3) to studies illustrating that many men still closely associate meat with health and power – and still have the potential to cause men of Gen Z – and of all age ranges – to think twice about a vegan lifestyle. While companies will certainly continue to advertise to their target audiences in the ways they believe will most effectively sell products, possibly, over time, ads insisting men must eat meat to be manly will go fully out of style. And maybe, over time, jokes made in various media forms at the expense of vegan diets will also slowly fall out of favor – as, for many, choosing a vegan diet is a matter of health necessity or a matter of ethical principle. Perhaps the characteristics of openness combined with a strong awareness of the changing boundaries about gender – and thus the evolving restrictive constructs – exuded by members of the Gen Z generation will help change what it means to eat from a ‘manly plate’. It will likely take continued conversations and problematization of the ties that have bound men to meat for many generations before lasting change takes hold; however, for the first time in many generations, this hope may become a reality sooner than we may have thought possible.

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Figure 1: Weight Watchers Online for Men (Online Ad)



Figure 2: The Keg (Print Ad)



Figure 3: Hardee's/Carl's Jr. (YouTube Ad)

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