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Man v Food Nation Reinforces Over-Eating as Acceptable Behavior for Americans

The reality-based television show *Man v. Food Nation* has stirred a range of emotions from its viewers from amazement to disgust. The Travel Channel show features food enthusiast Adam Richman who is in search of amazing eating experiences at local eateries in cities across the nation. While the show highlights local fare and provides a boost to the featured area's economy, the program does something much greater; it shows a side of America that may not want to be shared with other cultures: a love for indulging in extravagant foods.

Richman finds restaurants that serve all types of foods from super spicy, to super-sized. The idea behind *Man v. Food Nation* is to see if Richman can eat the food set before him or if the food will win out that day. Some episodes show him having to eat a five-pound burrito within a certain amount of time, or eating a super spicy Mexican dish without giving in to the extreme spiciness of the food. Other contests include: An 11-pound, 30-inch meat-covered pizza in Atlanta; the 7.5-pound Sasquatch hamburger in Memphis, Tennessee; the 72-ounce Big Texas in Amarillo, and the 190-pound hamburger that was devoured by 40 people in Detroit. Depending on the outcome of each food challenge, Richman will close each episode with his famous line, "Today in *Man v. Food*, man won...or food won".

The show, now in its fourth season, has evolved from its original name of "Man v. Food," which primarily highlighted Richman partaking in all the eating challenges; to "Man v. Food

Nation,” in which local “heroes” can also take part in the eating frenzy and show off their iron-clad stomachs on national television.

Although the show promotes local restaurants around the nation and highlights the diversity of foods, in a time when obesity is one of the nation’s biggest health concerns the show only perpetuates many of the attitudes and behaviors that lead to obesity. The show reinforces the United States as a society of people who indulge without concern for possible consequences and thrive on power and excess. It glamorizes over-indulgence in rich foods and uses the “conquering of food” as a sense of achievement.

To support the author’s position regarding *Man v. Food Nation* an indicative analysis of the program will show how it reinforces the status quo of over-indulgence, immediate gratification, and dominance in American society. The current obesity crisis in the U.S. and attitudinal and behavioral contributing factors will be examined. An analysis of the show’s structural framework, production elements, and cultural context will help the reader interpret the underlying messages; political economy theory will address the cultural implications for a society manipulated by big industries that depend on overeating.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the obesity rate in the United States has increased dramatically in the last 20 years. Adult obesity is at 33.8 percent with children and adolescents at 17 percent (Overweight and Obesity). At a time when Americans are struggling to control an obesity epidemic that has been brought about through culture acceptance of over-eating, *Man v. Food Nation* only serves to further worsen this crisis.

Using media scholar Art Silverblatt’s keys to media literacy it is evident that *Man v Food Nation*’s structural framework, production elements, and cultural context maintain a society of

over-indulgence. According to Silverblatt, “framework refers to the various structural elements of a production: Introduction, Plot, Genre, and Conclusion” (159). Examining elements of the program’s introduction, genre, and conclusion provides insight into the show’s lure and its affect on a culture of obesity. In the introduction element the title of the show *Man v Food Nation* connotes the characteristics of a culture built around food and food dominance. The show was originally titled *Man v Food*, but evolved into *Man v Food Nation* to better reflect a society of people who thrive on dominating food. According to the show’s website, viewers wanted to share in the food challenges and claim their own victories and therefore the show title changed to include everyday people participating in these challenges (About The Show).

The very nature of the show also presents an illogical premise in that it asks the audience to pretend that eating in this fashion is healthy, or at least acceptable. There are several underlying assumptions the audience has to accept to become a fan of the show: The immediate gratification of eating large amounts of rich foods is more important than the long-term effects on one’s health; being able to eat a large amount of food offers some type of emotional or physical reward, such as claiming dominance over the food; and foods can be glorified to a level of reverence.

The genre is characterized by people trying to maintain their current standard of living in a tight economy. Food has always been a symbol of wealth and security. Being able to gain control over food may help people feel more at ease during uncertain times.

Every episode ends with the same illogical conclusion: the host leaves satisfied with his accomplishments, feeling uncomfortably full, yet no recognition is given about how this unhealthy behavior may affect a person’s health in the long run. Only the immediate gratification

is highlighted, the long-term consequences are ignored. In an article in the Los Angeles Times, Richman says that he takes very good care of his health, exercising regularly, having regular physicals and taking supplements. He said the show highlights famous cuisine from local eateries that uses food as a springboard to promote travel. Richman insisted, "At no point do I, or the network, or the show espouse overeating...Travel in and of itself is an indulgence, and I think that travel gives us license to set aside a strict dietary regimen and indulge in the best of what that city has to offer" (qtd. in Freidenlander).

The media communicator's use of production elements such as music, camera angles and word choice are carefully choreographed to help the viewer accept these illogical premises. The background music played during the food preparation is intense and fast-paced, giving the viewer a feeling of excitement. As Silverblatt posits, Music can be used to affect moods and behaviors, and in this case fast-paced music agitates its listeners to eat more food, and faster (199). Fast-moving camera angles with close-ups of the "competition," make the food become larger than life. The camera pulls in for a tight shot of the host eating bite after bite of food as he works to get the food in to his stomach. Each production element works in unison to build an atmosphere of pleasure and conquest. The St. Louis episode highlighted a local restaurant that served the city's famous bar-be-que, as host Adam Richman uses a memorable analogy to describe the taste of the smoked brisket, "Imagine really awesome brisket had a baby, and it was blessed by God". In the same episode, the famed meat smoker, "Walter," is hailed to a level of sainthood as a halo of light surrounds the smoker (Mobmezz). Both references serve to glorify food to a level of reverence.

Even though the show does not espouse overeating, the show's entire unstated premise is that over-eating is positive when the food is something to be glorified. The show may not

actively promote over-eating, but the continually featured food challenges in the program implicitly encourage over-indulgence.

In the episode highlighting Honolulu restaurants, Richman dons a shirt with the words "Billy Goat" symbolizing he will eat anything, while the crowds in the restaurant cheer him on to "victory" over the "Mac-daddy," a 14 inch, four-pound stack of pancakes. His reward? A T-shirt and a spot on the winner's wall (of which only four have won the honor). (TravelChannelTV).

The choice of words used by Richman to describe the food and the impending challenge sets the stage for conquering the meal or glorifying it: "Meat battlefield", "takedown", "strategy for winning", etc. Words help justify the over-indulgence, making it acceptable, if not encouraged to eat such mass quantities. Even the host's name coincidentally carries deep symbolism with his first name representing "Adam-the son of Man" and his last name, Richman, illustrating the wealth and power to be gained through food.

Man v. Food Nation maintains the hegemonic message that eating beyond one's physical needs is normal and acceptable behavior for this culture. According to Richard Campbell et. al's book *Media & Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication*, hegemony occurs when the dominant class maintains control over the subordinate class by gaining its acceptance of certain attitudes or values as being "natural" (418). Each episode of Man v Food Nation tells a story about food, pleasure, and gratification through symbols, words, and images that reinforce the idea that over-indulgence is normal behavior and should be accepted without debate.

The show celebrates American culture, food, and tradition in a compelling way that gives the viewer a sense of pride in country and in culture, all while showing indulgence in life's pleasures is a positive and rewarding behavior. Although this particular program does not have a

direct connection to the United States' obesity epidemic, its hegemonic messages may create a gradual shift in behaviors that reinforce obesity and contribute to the overall problem.

Cultural studies theorist James Carey adopted a ritual view of communication in that it is a process through which culture is created and transformed. Messages are not merely transmission of information, but they serve to maintain society in a moment of time. It promotes a sacred ritual that allows participants to share in a sense of community and belonging (Carey 33). Man v. Food Nation is an example of ritualistic communication that brings together people through food. A sense of community is created when people come together to share in the victory of a food challenge. Being part of the Man v. Food Nation maintains the status quo of this culture's need to gratify its desires and not worry about future consequences.

Competitive eating is a sport that has become a popular trend in which people train their bodies to ingest inconceivable amounts of food, all in the spirit of competition. These "eaters" do not desire the food, only to win the food challenge and gain the notoriety. Man v. Food Nation is a televised extension of competitive eating and has spurred people across the nation to create and take on their own "Man v. Food" challenges. This is evident by the dozens of YouTube videos featuring everyday people participating in Man v. Food Nation-inspired competitive eating for sheer entertainment and bragging rights. Visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdPjqbwCb6Y> to view an example.

What is the significance of dominating food and what does it represent? Food has always been a symbol of power and wealth. People often try to gain control over something and choose to dominate food as a way of proving their self-worth.

In an article in the *Journal of American Folklore*, Michael Owen Jones discusses the symbolic importance society has placed on food. Inadvertently people use food metaphors to relate to something else, such as “to hunger for”, “cannibalize”, “sugar coat”, “sink our teeth into”, “hash it out”, etc. (Jones 132). People often associate food with events and places, feeling the emotional need to indulge in a special food that evokes certain feelings based on a memory (Jones 134). For example, someone may feel the need to consume a giant turkey leg and funnel cakes while at a carnival because consuming these foods replicates emotions from a significant past experience.

Man v. Food Nation encourages a culture to use food for means other than its intended purpose of nourishment. It glorifies food and persuades its audience that it can eat food for pleasure or to meet some emotional need. Because food has always been a cultural symbol for wealth and power, on a deeper level this show offers the viewer a sense of power and reinforces American’s security in a commodity that many nations cannot claim.

Art Silverblatt explains that “the term ‘popular’ connotes acceptance, approval, and shared values among large numbers of people” (94). He continues to say that people will not watch a program that they find offensive or do not accept. Based on the popularity of *Man v. Food Nation*, that is currently in its fourth season, this culture accepts the values and ideals reinforced in the program. Analyzing the main character in the program gives light as to its value system. Silverblatt discusses how “characters can be considered personifications of values” (109). Host Adam Richman, is an ordinary guy who claims to be a food enthusiast. He could represent anyone in the United States. Viewers watch Richman indulge in extravagant foods and because his persona is so representative of American culture, people can identify with him.

Because they see someone with similar “values” they accept his behaviors and easily adopt them as their own.

From a cultural studies perspective, political economy studies illustrate how there are conflicting messages about obesity's acceptance in this culture. This study focuses on how popular culture is produced and its connection to the economic and political agendas of its producers (Campbell et. al. 486). The television channels are filled with reality-based programs that address obesity as an unglamorous part of society: *Biggest Loser*, *One Big Happy Family*, *Jaime Oliver's Food Revolution*, and at the same time other programs portray messages that obesity is a natural part of an indulgent culture: *Man v. Food Nation*, *Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern*, *Paula's Home Cooking*, and *Famous Food*. These conflicting messages represent a society that approves of overeating, but disapproves of its long-term health consequences. Americans spend \$60 billion annually in the diet programs and products (Lemonnier), an industry that depends on maintaining a society of over-indulgence and regret.

Despite the United States ranking number one in the world for the nation with the highest rate of obesity, media communicators continue to reinforce a society of people that are driven by instant gratification, over-indulgence and dominance by using one of the greatest symbols of power and wealth—food. Analyzing the travel show *Man v. Food Nation* through Silverblatt's keys to media literacy, with emphasis on structural framework, production elements and cultural context, it is evident the program creates audience acceptance of over-eating and reinforces a society that uses food for means other than sustenance. The show also promotes an illogical premise that regularly eating food in excess does not carry any long-term health consequences.

The program conveys messages about power and pleasure that feeds into an already out of control value system placed on food. Political economy studies showed how the media has a

significant impact on the culture of food and its consumption in the United States. The longer media communicators continue to produce programming that reinforces unhealthy behaviors, the more difficult it will be to change these messages to encourage a much-needed healthier lifestyle. Man v. Food Nation encourages its audience to accept the falsehood that overeating is an acceptable behavior without consequence. But when it's all said and done, in the fight between man and food, who will come out ahead? Man or food?

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