



One Show, Two Worlds:

By Gacia Injeyan

How North American vs. Global Viewers Digest Gilmore Girls' Food References

*Presented to the Department of English & Communications
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts*

Abstract

In today's media landscape, where streaming culture reshapes how television is consumed, the portrayal of food and body image in popular shows plays a significant role in shaping societal norms and early-2000s series

Gilmore Girls is no exception to this. This project investigates how food, body image, and thin privilege are portrayed in the show and how these portrayals are received by different viewers based on their ethnography and geographical location

Introduction

Gilmore Girls follows Lorelai and Rory Gilmore through life in the quirky town of Stars Hollow. While often seen as lighthearted, the show subtly reflects early 2000s diet culture—where disordered eating was normalized or ignored. Lorelai and Rory’s constant takeout and Michel’s extreme dieting paint food as a “silent character.” With the show’s Netflix revival attracting younger, global audiences, many of whom didn’t grow up with this culture, it’s worth exploring how these portrayals of food and body image are understood across cultural and generational lines.



Research Questions

As this project aims to explore the relationship between eating habits on Gilmore Girls and body image, my three main research questions are:

- 1- In what ways does Gilmore Girls reinforce or challenge cultural norms around body image, eating habits, and thinness?
- 2- Are the eating habits in Gilmore Girls noticeable by the audience?
- 3- Does the perception of the eating habits in Gilmore Girls differ in impact between North American viewers and viewers from other regions?

Methodology

Survey

I've conducted a survey with original and binge-watchers of the show from all around the world, and gathered 1,378 responses

Focus Groups

I conducted two focus groups: one with North American viewers and one with international viewers.

My content analysis covers episodes from all seven seasons of Gilmore Girls, electing at least one episode per season.

Content Analysis

Key episodes include: S1E1 ("Pilot"), S1E14 ("That Damn Donna Reed"), S2E2 ("Hammers and Veils"), S2E18 ("Back in the Saddle Again"), S3E14 ("Swan Song"), S4E2 ("The Lorelais' First Day at Yale"), and S5E17 ("Pulp Friction").

Coding

My content analysis was organized into six recurring themes found throughout Gilmore Girls:

Indulgence

Food as Identity

Moralizing Food

Thin Privilege

Body Insecurity

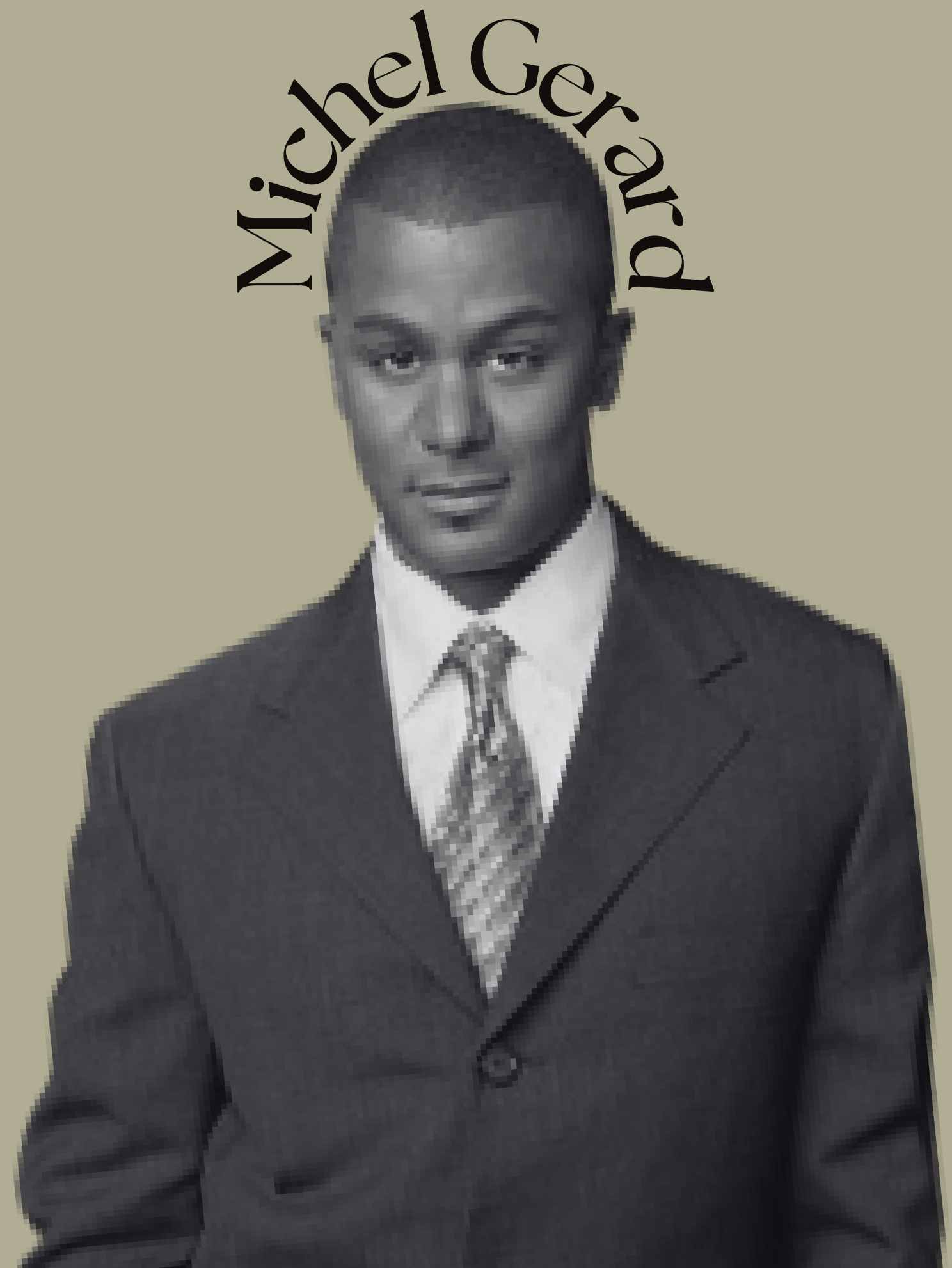
Mockery About Dieting

Lorelai and Rory are central to several coding themes: Indulgence, Food as Identity, and Thin Privilege. Their constant consumption of takeout, junk food, and sweets, often exaggerated for humor, signals indulgence, yet their thin bodies are never questioned. In the Pilot (S1E1), they bond over burgers and fries at Luke's, and in "That Damn Donna Reed" (S1E14), Lorelai mocks traditional cooking, using food as a way to assert her identity. Despite eating habits that would typically attract criticism, both characters are portrayed as effortlessly slim, reinforcing thin privilege without acknowledging potential consequences.

The Gilmore Girls



Michel exemplifies the themes of Body Insecurity, Moralizing Food, and Mockery About Dieting. Throughout the show, he obsessively counts calories, avoids carbs, and expresses anxiety about weight gain, yet these behaviors are often played for laughs rather than taken seriously. In “Back in the Saddle Again” (S2E18), he counts 13 blueberries in his pancake and says he can only eat 12, showing his extreme food control. Michel’s portrayal reveals the show’s tendency to trivialize restrictive eating and body image struggles, especially in men, by framing them as comedic quirks.



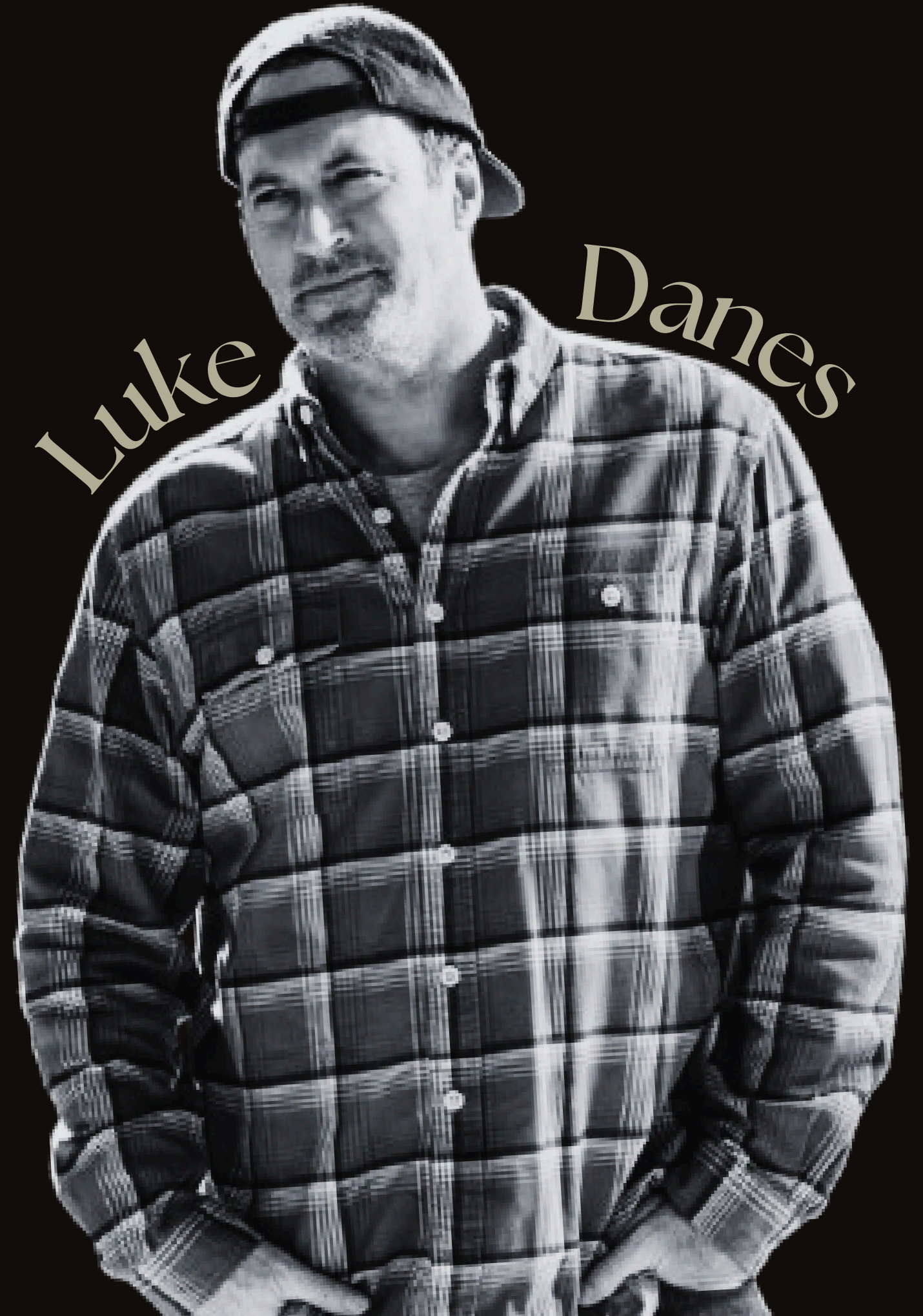
Finally, there are the rational characters. The ones who provide food rather than consume it in excess or limit it. Emily, Luke, and Sookie each represent a form of control and structure when it comes to food, and their identities are tied to nourishment and order.

Emily Gilmore



Emily's relationship to food is one of ritual and performance. She hosts elaborate dinners, hires chefs, and treats mealtimes as a tool for maintaining class and decorum. In Season 1, Episode 6 ("Rory's Birthday Parties"), the contrast between Emily's formal dinner and the pizza-filled party at Lorelai's house becomes a clear representation for their different worlds. For Emily, food is about presentation and belonging to a class. She controls food the way she tries to control everything else, and bases it around her etiquette and traditions.

Luke, by contrast, provides food with a quiet kind of rationality. He feeds Stars Hollow (including the Gilmores) with consistency. His diner is a space of stability in a world that often veers toward chaos. In S1E1 when Lorelai pleads for coffee, he resists her caffeine addiction but still pours her a cup. He is the boundary she pushes against, and the voice of reason. His rationality is protective.



Luke Danes



Unlike both Emily and Luke, Sookie's rationality is rooted in her expertise. As a chef, Sookie is the most directly connected character to the preparation and the "art" of food. Her love for food is never tied to guilt or shame, and it is not tied to class or provision. It is simply an extension of her creativity and the clearest example of food as a source of joy and artistry, not anxiety.

Survey Results

To gather a wide range of perspectives, I shared my survey on various platforms, including Reddit, X (formerly Twitter), and with the help of the fan page @thinkergilmore on Instagram. This outreach resulted in 1,378 total responses. For clarity, I divided the data into North America (935) and International (293 Europeans; 150 “Else” including Asia, the Middle East, Oceania, Latin America, and North Africa). Among North American viewers, most discovered the show through streaming and binge-watching. While 57.5% found Lorelai and Rory’s eating habits unrealistic, only 8.98% reported a change in their own eating behavior. In contrast, European viewers were more critical—66.6% saw the food/body relationship as unrealistic, and 12.3% reported behavioral change. Respondents from the “Else” category showed the highest influence, with 21.3% saying their habits changed. These findings highlight how cultural background shapes audience interpretation, with international viewers showing more sensitivity to the show’s food portrayals than those in North America.

Focus Groups

Group 1: North Americans

Group 1: North Americans

This group, made up of North American viewers, emphasized the emotional and social role food plays in daily life. Many participants described unhealthy eating not in terms of what is eaten, but how highlighting patterns like overeating or eating out of convenience due to busy schedules. The portrayal of food in *Gilmore Girls* felt familiar to some, especially those who grew up with fast food as a regular part of family bonding. However, there was also a strong awareness of how cultural and economic backgrounds shape eating habits. Some viewers began questioning their own consumption after interacting with people from other regions, realizing how uniquely American their fast food habits were. A few also noted the unrealistic aspect of the *Gilmore girls'* diets, not just in terms of body image, but financially questioning how characters with modest incomes could sustain such frequent takeout.

Focus Groups

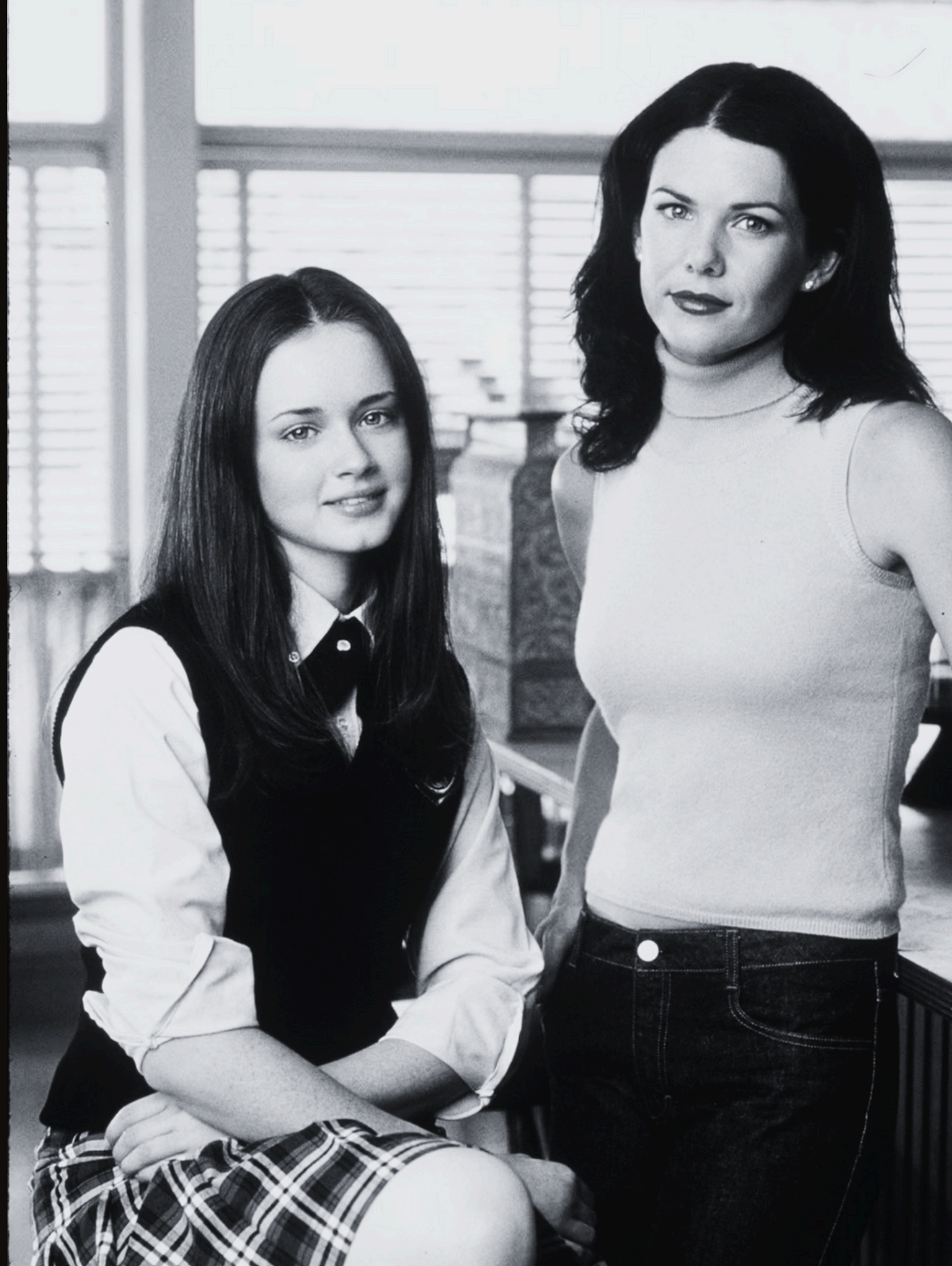
Group 2: Non North Americans

Group 2: Non North Americans

Participants from outside North America generally viewed unhealthy eating through a more nutritional lens, focusing on food quality, portion size, and balance. Many expressed that the binge-style eating in the show stood out and, while it didn't affect their enjoyment, it did raise questions about realism. For some, the absence of home-cooked meals was more noticeable than the amount of junk food consumed, pointing to cultural differences in how meals are experienced. The show's food habits felt exaggerated, and for a series grounded in everyday life, this made it harder for a few viewers to connect with the characters. Overall, this group approached the show's eating patterns with more critical distance, often comparing them to their own routines shaped by different food values and norms.

Conclusion

By examining key characters on the show, it becomes clear that food is not just a prop in the series, but a recurring symbol that reflects personality, relationships, and social commentary. While Lorelai and Rory's endless indulgence in junk food is often presented as humorous and relatable, it also reveals contradictions between what is shown and what is realistically sustainable in everyday life. Across different cultural contexts, these portrayals resonate in distinct ways, exposing deeper questions about what behaviors are normalized in media, how viewers interpret them, and what silent messages are left unspoken.



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