

One Show, Two Worlds: How North American vs. Global Viewers Digest

***Gilmore Girls'* Food References**

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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. The research involved content analysis of selected episodes and audience studies through surveys and focus groups.

Keywords: Gilmore Girls, body image, food representation in media, diet culture, femininity, thin privilege, media reception, audience analysis, eating habits, eating disorders.

Introduction

Set in the small town of Stars Hollow, Amy Sherman-Palladino's *Gilmore Girls* is a drama-comedy about the relationship between single mother Lorelai Gilmore and her daughter Rory. The show, which aired from 2000 to 2007 on The WB, followed them as they navigated family, friendships, love, and everything in between (including Lorelai's estranged relationship with her wealthy, traditional parents, and Rory's dreams of attending an Ivy League school). During the 7 seasons (and Netflix's revival later on), the pair gets to experience life alongside their tight-knit community full of quirky characters, like Taylor Doose, Luke Danes, Michel Gerard, and Miss Patty.

While on surface level, this sounds heartwarming, the show does present a subtle commentary on early 2000s culture, where disordered eating was either silently idealized or overlooked. From Lorelai and Rory's refusal to cook at home in favor of excessive indulgence in takeout food, to Michel's extremely strict dietary habits that seemed to go unnoticed by everyone around him throughout the show's life, food functions as a pivotal, yet "silent character" in *Gilmore Girls*. However, the way audiences perceive these portrayals is influenced by cultural and societal norms, raising the question of whether or not North American and international viewers interpret these messages differently.

The show's fast-paced dialogue diverts the viewers' attention away from the characters' eating habits, which inherently places the viewer in the role of a silent observer, akin to someone witnessing a friend with an eating disorder. Just as those around the characters may overlook the signs and cues of disordered eating, the audience may also fail to fully grasp these dynamics. However, the fact that the audience may overlook these behaviours does not mean it lacks

impact. Many early 2000s shows (even those targeted at children), subtly portrayed thin, skinny characters as the “popular,” “pretty,” and “desirable” ones. And while these types of underlying messages are widely present in a lot of media, I want to focus on its presence in *Gilmore Girls* specifically because of the show’s recent resurgence on social media and its growing appeal almost two decades after its finale.

A big factor in this renewed popularity is the rise of streaming services in today’s digital age. When *Gilmore Girls* became available on Netflix in 2014, it quickly became one of the platform’s most-watched shows, especially among teenagers who were not part of its original run. So, for younger audiences already growing up in a world saturated with social media and driven by beauty standards, the normalization of such behaviors (without addressing their potential implications) can contribute to the development of body image issues, especially when someone is repeatedly exposed to them. For younger viewers outside of North America for instance, who may not have grown up immersed in the early 2000s diet culture, the show’s portrayal of food and body image might not carry the same nostalgic familiarity but instead raise questions about how these narratives translate across different backgrounds. Thus, I seek to understand how *Gilmore Girls*’ portrayal of food and body image is interpreted across cultural and generational lines.

Literature Review

Media has always played a big role when it came to shaping different norms—be it gender roles, societal expectations, or body image. In the late 1990s and early 2000s’ film and television, the “thin ideal” dominated almost all of the media. From subplots of characters’ eating habits, to the freakishly thin and slender physical appearance of others, these subtle narratives are often unconsciously absorbed by the viewer, and in many cases, internalized in the long run.

To fully understand how this internalization begins to manifest, one must first look into the type of media children are exposed to. Mullin (2023) explores how film and television of this era, specifically those that were catered to children, subtly reinforced unrealistic beauty standards for their viewers, even if they were technically too young to understand it at first. From shows like *Zoey 101* and *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody*, to Disney princesses, the way characters were portrayed set the foundation for children on what is the “right” and “wrong” way to look. Mullin brings forward some examples of Disney princesses: “Ariel had a flat stomach, and her enemy was a fat and “ugly” purple octopus,” (Mullin, 2023, p.5) and “Belle had a tiny waist and arms, and was extremely thin.” (Mullin, 2023, p.5) Now obviously, these children’s shows and films might not have immediately triggered any sort of body image issues in its viewers (who were predominantly kids), but they have “ingrained” (Mullin, 2023) the idea of “being skinny” in their minds, and made them aware of calories. Mullin’s research later proves that many of those who were exposed to these shows as children, grew up to develop body image issues, and even eating disorders in some cases.

Levine and Murnen (2009) explain this phenomena and the reasoning behind it. “Children are heavy consumers of mass media that are replete with clear messages about the positive features of thinness and the many negative aspects of being fat,” (Levine & Murnen, 2009, p.11) and with these kinds of messages being the “norm” in late 1990s and early 2000s film and television, there is arguably no way to escape this exposure. But even if the viewer is constantly watching these shows, and seeing those characters on their television screen, it’s not like they are directly and verbally being told to start counting their calories, or excessively working out. So why is it that this repeated and consistent exposure to slim bodies (seemingly always) leads to poor relationships with food for many of its viewers, years later? Levine and Murnen (2009) explain this through the cultivation theory, which suggests that “normative beliefs about the social world, as emphasized in mass media, become beliefs and attitudes about the self.” (Levine & Murnen, 2009, p.28) This means that over time, these portrayals of slimness as the standard of beauty influences viewers to internalize these ideals, developing beliefs about their own worth based on these media-driven standards. If you take into account how children who consumed shows (like the ones Mullin mentions in her study) with these underlying messages, grew up to consume adolescents and young adults’ television and film with similar messages, you begin to understand how this constant and consistent exposure eventually pushes one into developing issues with their body and eating habits.

Now, once a viewer gets to a point of being aware of their body in comparison to what they are seeing in the media, this awareness (in most cases) begins to manifest in different ways depending on the viewer’s gender. Harrison (2000) and Tiggemann (2003) both conduct different studies to prove this. To begin with the latter, Tiggemann investigates the relationship between media exposure—specifically magazines and television—and disordered eating among young

adults (precisely/strictly females). In his findings, he explains how television-watching was directly related to self-esteem, but not magazine reading. (Tiggemann, 2003, p.426) He also mentions that “heavier television watchers have lower self-esteem.” (Tiggemann, 2003, p.426) To put it in other words: the longer a viewer is exposed to television media, the more their body image and self-esteem issues begin to surface. But how does the reaction to these body image issues differ amongst men and women? Harrison conducts a research study very similar to Tiggemann’s, except he investigates both females AND males. According to Harrison’s study, television viewing for females predicted bulimia, whereas it predicted anorexia nervosa for males. (Harrison, 2003, p.131) I find this particularly interesting because of the direct relation between the genders-the disorders, and the way those same genders-eating habits are portrayed in young adult television of this—late 1990s to early 2000s—era, and more specifically, in the case of my project, *Gilmore Girls*.

Starting with the more straightforward case, the eating habits of the show’s concierge, Michel Gerard, clearly exhibit signs of anorexic behavior. This was never really confirmed nor acknowledged in the show or by the production, and while it might be unprofessional to diagnose a fictional character with an eating disorder, it is painfully obvious that Michel’s obsessive calorie counting, fear of fast food, and avoidance of “fattening” foods strongly suggests that he, at the very least, struggles with disordered eating, and at most, is anorexic. This is interesting to note because the show, which aired from 2000 to 2007, most probably used this “quirk” for comedic relief, but if you tie it back to Harrison’s research findings, Michel’s character may be reflecting a deeper pattern, or even a reality.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are the mother-daughter leads of the show, Lorelai and Rory Gilmore. One of Lorelai and Rory’s biggest “quirks,” which is a recurring theme

throughout the entirety of the show, is their obsession with fast food and takeout. This is obviously done as a means of making them more relatable to a viewer, because at the end of the day, who doesn't enjoy pizzas, pancakes, and burgers? The underlying issue here, however, isn't their inherent love for fast food, but the fact that they remain slim and thin while overindulging in fattening foods and drinks almost every day. Neugarten (2021) actually brings forward an interesting point about *Luke's Diner* in the show, and how it "enables and encourages gluttony." (Neugarten, 2021, p.77) She explains that the diner is a "utopian space for women" (Neugarten, 2021, p.74) on the show—defining utopian as "a space where women are safe from physical and verbal violence." (Neugarten, 2021, p.72) This "utopian space" for the female characters on the show also happens to be a space to enable gluttony under the umbrella-term of "safety." In almost every episode of *Gilmore Girls*, we see Lorelai or Rory (or both) ordering insane amounts of coffee, pancakes, eggs, or burgers. This behavior in itself can be tied back to their gender, as Mayrhofer, Naderer & Binder (2019) have proven. In their study, they find that unhealthy food references are often more associated with female characters rather than male ones, and this directly parallels Lorelai and Rory's characters. Throughout the show, we constantly see Lorelai and Rory ordering massive amounts of junk food from the diner, often to the concern or annoyance of Luke. What we don't see, however, is them gaining any sort of weight.

Tying this back to Harrison's (2000) study-and I must reiterate again that I am in no way diagnosing these characters with eating disorders, but rather, highlighting the correlation between Harrison's findings, and the characters' eating habits. Now, as mentioned earlier, Harrison's (2000) study found that television viewing can trigger bulimia in females. And while there's no direct suggestion that Lorelai or Rory suffer from bulimia, their ability to eat large quantities of

unhealthy food without any visible impact on their bodies may be a reflection of the reality of the early 2000s.

All of this brings us back to the core and the central point of my project: how *Gilmore Girls*, in one way or another, reflects the broader cultural narratives. Whether through Michel's struggles with disordered eating or Lorelai and Rory's unrealistic relationship with food and weight, the show mirrors the reality of many of those who have or have had eating disorders that were (partially) internalized through television viewing. In a way, it's a cycle where media consumption reinforces cultural standards, which in turn shape media portrayals.

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

1. Content Analysis

I conducted close readings of different episodes throughout the seasons and looked into key moments on the show, identifying the patterns in the portrayal of bodies and eating habits. This was done in order to help me to analyze and look into the recurring themes (such as overeating without consequences, body-conscious behaviour or certain dialogue about food) and their frequency. My coding will be based off of two categories:

a) Food Consumption

I. Indulgence (*this includes any moments of overeating junk food, consuming tons of sugar and caffeine, etc...*)

II. Food as identity (*this includes any moments of making food one's personality: eg. "I'm a coffee addict!"*)

III. Moralizing food (*this includes any moments of moralizing food consumption as either good or bad. "I shouldn't eat this"*)

b) Body Image & Weight Talk

I. Thin privilege

II. Body insecurity

III. Mockery about dieting

The episodes referenced in my content analysis span across all seasons of *Gilmore Girls* (excluding the Netflix Revival *Gilmore Girls: A Year In The Life*), with at least one episode from each season to ensure a comprehensive overview. Some notable episodes in my analysis include:

Season 1, Episode 1 (“Pilot”)

Season 1, Episode 14 (“That Damn Donna Reed”)

Season 2, Episode 2 (“Hammers and Veils”)

Season 2, Episode 18 (“Back in the Saddle Again”)

Season 3, Episode 14 (“Swan Song”)

Season 4, Episode 2 (“The Lorelais’ First Day at Yale”)

Season 5, Episode 17 (“Pulp Friction”)

For ease of reading, episodes will be referenced using the standard shorthand format (e.g., S1E14 for Season 1, Episode 14). Episodes not listed above that are briefly mentioned later in my analysis will first be introduced in full (Season X, Episode X (“Title”)), and referred to in shorthand afterwards.

2. Survey Research

Conducting a survey helped me get some quantitative and qualitative data for my project, and the target audience was individuals who watched the show during its original airing, as well as those who have seen it as part of its recent resurgence. Most of the questions were multiple choice ones, and included (but were not limited to):

1- In your opinion, were there any noticeable differences in how male and female characters’ eating habits were depicted?

2- How did the portrayal of the characters' eating habits affect your perception of their lifestyle or health (if any)?

3- Did you see yourself represented in the way the characters approached food? Why or why not?

4- How would you describe the role of food in *Gilmore Girls*?

And by analyzing the responses to such questions, I was able to look for geography-based patterns in perceptions, and potential self-reported effects on body image.

3. Focus Groups

Since focus groups allow for a more in-depth discussion, I have conducted two focus groups with viewers of the show. The first focus group was with North American viewers of the show, while the second focus group was with international viewers. The opportunity to ask more open-ended questions gave my participants the chance to share in-depth experiences and emotional responses that surveys do not fully capture, which in turn gave me qualitative data on the effects of the show based on geography.

I limited each focus group to around six participants to create an open and comfortable space for sharing experiences. I think a larger group could have potentially caused distress or made it harder for some participants to open up. As for the process of selecting my participants, I have posted and reached out to people through different social media sub platforms related to the show, notably Reddit, X (formerly known as Twitter), and Instagram.

As mentioned earlier, the focus groups gave me more nuanced, qualitative data that surveys or content analysis alone could not have given me.

Content Analysis

a) Food Consumption

I. Indulgence

One of the most striking patterns observed in *Gilmore Girls* is the association of the protagonists with food indulgence, be it sugar, junk food, or caffeine. From the very first Season 1, Episode 1 (“Pilot”), coffee is established as a core character trait for Lorelai and Rory. Lorelai’s very first lines are about coffee, and in the span of the pilot episode, Lorelai has nine big cups of coffee. This could be seen as a behavioral tic or a comfort for her, but ultimately, especially with all the episodes to come, it becomes a marker of her (and Rory’s) identity. The same thing happens when it comes to their food consumption. Food scenes in the show are often seen as bonding moments: Friday night dinners with boxes of Chinese food, popcorn and candy-covered movie marathons, or sitting across from each other at Luke’s Diner with pancakes and bacon piling up between them. Their eating habits are romanticized and stylized.

This indulgence is framed not as unhealthy, but quirky and endearing. The girls’ eating habits are portrayed as a central part of their personalities, adding to their charm. It’s a reversal of common television tropes where women are often shown dieting or expressing guilt over food. Here, there’s no calorie counting. Yet, the sheer excess subtly invites the viewer to wonder how realistic this relationship with food is, given their physical appearance (which ties into Section 4: Thin Privilege). Throughout the seasons, Lorelai and Rory’s main personality trait (outside of their mother-daughter relationship) becomes their love for junk food, and rejection of healthy alternatives. For instance, and as referenced earlier, the pilot episode plays a big role in setting our characters up for their future roles in respect to food. The first scene of the show is

literally Lorelai rushing into Luke's Diner asking him for her 6th cup of coffee of the day. Luke gives her a pep-talk about how what she is doing is not very healthy, and even later warns Rory to "not to grow up and be like her mother."

Another example could be seen in Season 2, Episode 2 ("Hammers & Veils"). After a fight with Emily, Rory and Lorelai rush into Luke's and Rory orders a cup of coffee alongside a "rant meal" with extra cheese. Lorelai asks for an "acceptance meal." This is a recurring theme in the show, where the girls order massive meals (even bigger and denser than their "normal" meals, which are still already very unhealthy).

These meals obviously are nourishment. The girls have to eat. However, more than that, they are symbolic. They represent whatever moment the girls are in in their lives. Be it a celebration, like the finale, when Luke organizes a surprise going-away party for Rory, or stress like when the girls binge-eat different takeouts in Rory's new dorm room, and even rebellion. The act of eating becomes a way for Lorelai and Rory to not necessarily cope with negative emotions, but rather to celebrate any and every emotion. Going through a breakup? Have a burger. Got into Yale? Here's a pizza. Having a very, normal mundane day? It's time for 15 pancakes and waffles! Yet, while their eating habits grow more excessive in scenes like these, their bodies remain unchanged, untouched by the consequences such a diet would likely bring in real life. It's a form of magical realism, where their thinness is preserved despite the exaggerated food rituals, reinforcing the fantasy that women can indulge endlessly and still conform to societal beauty norms.

II. Food as Identity

As mentioned earlier, the Gilmore girls' food consumption becomes a quirky character trait that we associate with them. From their excessive coffee intake to their unapologetic love for junk food, food is not just a part of their lifestyle but rather, a central point to their self-expression. In analyzing how food operates as identity in *Gilmore Girls*, it becomes clear that this relationship isn't just about humor or aesthetic. However, to better understand the ways in which food builds identity in the show, this section is divided into three sub-categories: Pride, Shame, and Rationality. Each reflects a different mode of self-presentation, rooted in how the characters understand themselves and how they wish to be seen.

1- Pride:

No characters embody food pride more vividly than Lorelai and Rory. Their relationship to food is excessive, performative, and unapologetic. They construct their identity around consumption as a statement. For instance, for most characters on the show, coffee is just coffee. A drink they have during the day to fuel them. But for the girls, it is literally their main quirk and "personality," they are *known* for loving coffee by everyone in Stars Hollow. Their pride in indulgence is especially visible when contrasted with more "disciplined" or conventional characters. In Season 1, Episode 14 ("That Damn Donna Reed"), Rory defends her disinterest in traditional domestic roles, while Lorelai mocks the idea of women cooking dinner for men. This comes after the girls invite Dean over for a movie night and have a conversation about Donna Reed:

RORY: She made homemade doughnuts, chocolate cake, a lamb chop-mashed potato dinner, and enough stew to feed Cambodia all in one episode.

DEAN: So what?

RORY: You really like that concept, don't you?

DEAN: I mean, it's a little over the top but the general idea of a wife cooking dinner for her husband and family, that's nice. Why is that not nice?

RORY: It's not just that. It's the having to have the dinner on the table as soon as the husband gets home and having to look perfect to do housework and the whole concept that her one point in life is to serve somebody else.

Yet, the same episode reveals a complexity because Rory tries out the housewife fantasy for Dean, wearing a 1950s dress and cooking a proper meal, but the pride she feels in her identity (the one built around takeout and TV dinners), ultimately wins out. At the Friday night dinner of the week, Lorelai teases Rory after Emily asks her what she has been up to. Lorelai responds with "Aprons," and Rory immediately shuts it down.

This pride is also not only personal but relational. The Gilmores' overindulgence is often a bonding ritual. For instance, in Episode 2 of Season 4 ("The Lorelais First Day at Yale"), and despite the fact that Rory had had her "special" (a sausage wrapped in a pancake tied together with bacon) at Luke's Diner that morning, Lorelai orders an obscene amount of takeout to Rory's Yale dorm that afternoon. With the help of Rory's roommates, they make a food-geography map and place the takeouts onto the table based on which country the food originates from.

LORELAI: I've got Balinese. Where does Bali go?

RORY: Indonesia.

PARIS: Is Indonesia east or west of the Philippines?

TANNA: East.

RORY: No, west.

LORELAI: Near Singapore? We've got Singapore here somewhere.

TANNA: Find Sri Lanka, it's a bit over from that.

LORELAI: But there's no Sri Lankan food.

RORY: Just put it by Vietnam.

Lorelai then says that “the point of this is that we need a wide cross section for our local takeout test. We’re getting everything within delivery distance so we can judge the quality of food, speed of service.”

2- Shame:

In contrast to Lorelai and Rory’s pride is the sarcastic concierge at the Independence Inn, Michel, and his relationship to food, which revolves around and is characterized by shame. His obsession with dieting, his fear of calories, and his secretive eating habits reveal an anxious attachment to food, not as pleasure, but as threat. He exists in sharp contrast to the Gilmores, whose bodies seem untouched by consequence. Michel is always counting, restricting, denying. But the show uses his anxiety as a joke, reinforcing a subtle hierarchy of food-based virtue.

In Season 2, Episode 18 (“Back in the Saddle Again”), Michel’s obsession with maintaining a strict diet is exposed when his mother arrives and Lorelai gleefully tells her about his carb restrictions. The humor here is not just in the reveal but in the betrayal: Michel’s control is framed as ridiculous and fragile, basically one worthy of mockery. Michel’s identity is bound up with bodily discipline, but the emotional cost of that discipline is never taken seriously by those around him. What makes Michel’s shame so visible is its contrast to the ease with which Lorelai and Rory consume. His efforts to conform to aesthetic and health ideals only highlight how others, especially women, are granted indulgence without guilt.

But this indulgence is not neutral because it relies on projecting conventional female neuroses about weight and calorie counting onto Michel, a gay-coded man, whose character is often framed through stereotypes of femininity (his flamboyant-ness, interest in aesthetics, close

relationships with women, etc...). The show basically displaces these food-related burdens from its heroines and this gendered inversion allows the Gilmores to maintain their carefree relationship with food while Michel becomes the vessel for behaviors typically associated with female insecurity. His food shame is feminized, but because it's housed in a male body, it's treated as absurd and laughable. The humor works because viewers recognize the neuroses, but the show sidesteps the discomfort by giving them to someone who exists outside the normative and stereotypical.

This all intersects with body surveillance since Michel's calorie counting is tied not just to what he eats, but to what he fears becoming. His eating disorder, voiced frequently and with comedic exaggeration, points to the deep anxiety around body discipline in a world that equates thinness with control. The joke works precisely because, as mentioned earlier, his suffering *can* be made into a spectacle rather than a subject, due to this gender-flip.

This is all particularly interesting because in a study conducted by Kristen Harrison that investigates the relationship between media exposure and disordered eating among young adults, Harrison had found that television viewing predicted for females predicted bulimia, whereas it predicted anorexia nervosa for males (Harrison, 2003, p.131), and this is relevant to Michel, as his behavior in *Gilmore Girls* aligns with traits commonly associated with anorexia nervosa.

3- Rationality:

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.

For starters, 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.

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.

III. Moralizing Food

Beneath the humor and quirkiness, food is often moralized: characters mark certain foods as "good" or "bad," and those labels extend to the people who eat them. Whether it's the sugar-fueled chaos of the Gilmore girls' diet or the scolding tone of characters like Emily and Richard, the show creates a world where eating habits quietly signal worth, failure, and femininity.

Michel provides one of the show's most overt illustrations of food moralization. In a moment that initially reads as comic relief, he lashes out at Sookie for offering him macaroons and chocolate pralines, exclaiming: "I only eat fifteen hundred calories a day. If I eat that, I cannot have my Boca burger later." The precision of his caloric tracking, and the subsequent panic at the possibility of "wasting" it on sweets reveals how he sees eating as a calculated system of reward and punishment. The macarons are threats to his self-image and regimen. The Boca burger, on the other hand, becomes a marker of a "safe" virtue, since it is technically a healthier vegetarian alternative to the junk food burgers Rory and Lorelai are eating.

Similarly, in S1E14, Michel becomes hysterical when Sookie offers a "three egg omelette with goat cheese cooked in a sherry olive oil." He yells and refuses the omelet, saying "I don't eat dairy and meat. You know this!" This moment, again, is meant as a comedic relief and a break from all the drama and tension between Rory and Dean after their tense conversation and different opinions about Donna Reed. To us as viewers, this moment is initially funny because dairy and meat are huge food groups, which means that Michel is on an incredibly restrictive diet, and this, as mentioned earlier is funny because while it is a "feminine" trait, it is coming from a male body, and this absurdity is funny and laughable.

Another example of this could be seen in S2E18 when Sookie prepares some pancakes for Michel.

SOOKIE: Okay, here we go. Low fat, whole wheat blueberry pancakes.

MICHEL: Are there twelve?

SOOKIE: Twelve what?

MICHEL: Blueberries. I can *only* have twelve blueberries for breakfast.

SOOKIE: Or what?

MICHEL: What do you mean, or what?

SOOKIE: What happens if you eat thirteen blueberries? Would you die? . I'll hand you the plate only if you don't count.

MICHEL: I won't count.

SOOKIE: Swear. Raise your right hand and say, 'May Destiny's Child break up if I count these blueberries.

MICHEL: Pick another group. SOOKIE: Nope. MICHEL: I hate you! Hate you!

This exchange once again highlights my point that the humor here emerges because it's so excessive and, on the surface, out of character for a male. But this behavior would not be received as humor if it came from a woman. The same rigid food control and obsessive counting that Michel engages in would be immediately labeled as concerning if it was coming from a female character. Women are often scrutinized for their relationship with food, especially when it seems obsessive or disordered, and such behaviors are framed as unhealthy or symptomatic of deeper issues. So naturally, in contrast, Michel's behavior is accepted as a quirky characteristic and an almost endearing oddity, because he's a man. This gendered double standard is crucial in understanding the way the show portrays food-related behaviors differently depending on the gender of the character while reinforcing thin privilege and the normalization of restrictive eating when it comes from male characters, and simultaneously suggesting such actions are problematic in women.

Even Rory and Lorelai, the show's main girls for unrepentant junk food consumption participate in this "moralizing food" logic. Their ability to consume large quantities of pizza and burgers without consequence is framed as a kind of magical immunity. But that magic only works because it's underlined by contrast. When other characters express food-related guilt, it's meant to elevate the Gilmores as exceptional. The show doesn't eliminate moral food talk in their case. It *inverts* it. Their indulgence becomes its own kind of moral superiority, and

underneath this performative gluttony is still a system of judgment. This inversion aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the *carnavalesque* in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, which is essentially a temporary suspension or reversal of social norms that, rather than dismantling hierarchy, often end up reinforcing it. In the world of *Gilmore Girls*, the girls' excessive, guilt-free eating appears rebellious or liberating, but only because they remain thin and privileged enough for the indulgence to read as quirky rather than shameful. Their inverted relationship to food guilt (where indulgence is rewarded instead of punished or seen as concerning) still relies on the same cultural framework of judgment and exclusion.

Nowadays, "clean eating," "cheat days," and "guilt-free snacks" are phrases that exist because food is no longer neutral. And by consistently attaching value to foods, whether through praise and pride, shame, or fear as mentioned earlier, the show semi-mirrors real-life food culture by inverting it. Rory and Lorelai constantly eating junk food, Luke being the "nurturer," and Michel being the one counting calories are all inversions of the stereotypical roles, but they do not dismantle them.

b) Body Image and Weight Talk

I. Thin Privilege

Thin privilege in *Gilmore Girls* manifests not just through the Gilmore girls' bodies, but through the humor and admiration that surrounds their consumption. Their thinness protects them. It allows them to eat without scrutiny, to make overeating a personality trait, to joke about bingeing without social consequences. When Rory says she needs "twelve pancakes and a side of pancakes," is framed as charming. Audiences are encouraged to laugh, to love their appetites.

This thin privilege also shields Rory and Lorelai from being moralized in the way other characters are. They never talk about working out, dieting, or “watching what they eat,” simply because they don’t have to. They are rewarded socially, romantically, and professionally while sustaining habits that would, in any other context, be subject to concern or critique. For instance, in Season 5, Episode 17 (“Pulp Friction”), Luke sees Lorelai’s fridge, and she says it’s a “Lorelai Paradox,” how she always stays thin despite eating junk. But would these same lines be endearing if spoken by a fat character? Would a larger body be allowed the same comedic leeway?

The show never answers that question directly. Even Sookie, who exists in a slightly larger body, is often portrayed as the *other* to Lorelai’s slim, carefree persona. Sookie’s relationship to food is more complicated, since she’s a chef, but she is also framed as emotional, clumsy, and at times insecure. Her body places her outside the protective bubble of thinness, and thus, her appetite requires management (social, emotional, or otherwise).

In Season 3, Episode 14 (“Swan Song”), At a Friday night dinner, Emily tries to make conversation and ends up mocking modern dietary concerns, saying, “Dinner parties used to be simple. Now every time we give one, I have to run my menu down with every person on the list. It’s tiring,” before gesturing to Rory and adding, “But this one eats just about anything.” When Rory tries to cut her off, Emily continues, “I’m sorry, but the way you and your mother eat, and those slim figures of yours. It’s a medical marvel,” she turns to Rory’s boyfriend, Jess, and he jokingly suggests they should be studied. A similar moment happens between Luke and Lorelai in S5E17 when Luke comes over to the girls’ house and goes through their fridge.

LUKE: There’s nothing in here but ice cream, candy bars, cookie dough, canned frosting. Why are you not four hundred and fifty pounds?

LORELAI: I know. Scientists call it the Lorelai Paradox.

The moment plays as light humor, but it underscores both the show's use of food-based script and the way Rory and Lorelai's eating habits are framed as not only as unusual, but more so "worthy of admiration" because they remain thin. This exchange highlights the thin privilege that is masked as praise, reinforcing the idea that indulgence is only socially acceptable (or even enviable) when it comes without visible consequence. In this way, the show also subtly *pretends* to rebel against food shaming. The Gilmores' endless eating may *look* like resistance to diet culture, but in truth, it's only made possible by their thinness. Their privilege renders their habits as not alarming. And in a media landscape where bodies are always being read, their slim figures allow them to say and eat whatever they want, while everyone else watches what they say and eats only what they should.

II. Body Insecurity

Underneath *Gilmore Girls*' fast-talking charm and cozy nostalgia lies a quieter, more persistent current of body insecurity (particularly among the show's secondary characters). One example of this happens in S1E14 when Sookie enthusiastically offers Michel the "three egg omelette with goat cheese cooked in a sherry olive oil," and he refuses, saying, "But I can't eat like THAT and look like HER," gesturing toward Lorelai.

III. Mockery About Dieting

Mockery about dieting also surfaces throughout the show, but unlike other the sub-categories discussed throughout my content analysis, it strictly appears in moments of humor. On surface-level, this seems harmless since the whole point of having those mocking

moments *is* to make the scene feel light-hearted and unserious. However, this is not exactly how the audiences *perceive* these moments.

For instance, in Season 2, Episode 9 (“Run Away, Little Boy”), Lorelai bursts into Luke’s Diner, where Rory is having a burger, fries, and a coke, and begins eating her food. Having just returned from a date, Rory asks her what happened, and Lorelai responds sarcastically, “He took me to a very hip, very chic, very small portions place.” She continues talking about the date, and then follows up with “You know, we talked about all the things we had in common and then the salad came.” While the moment in itself is “light” and essentially played for laughs, it shows the show’s discourse around the culture of dieting, and even more so when it doesn’t align with the characters’ preferred indulgent eating habits.

Lorelai makes similar remarks in S2E18 when Michel’s mother visits the Inn. After returning from a restaurant date with her son, Giselle casually mentions their meal (pasta) to Lorelai and Sookie. Lorelai’s response (“Michel ate pasta?”) comes from a place of disbelief that immediately casts doubt on Michel’s ability to enjoy food without restriction. In response, Giselle insists that Michel loves pasta and eats it often, and Lorelai doubles down, saying, “Not around us. Here it’s all no-carb, low-cal, let me see if I can eat less than the lab rats do.”

It is a recurring theme with Lorelai to poke fun at and mock eating habits and lifestyles that do not align with hers. And this is obviously not done with malicious intents, as Lorelai is a character defined by her quick wit and sarcasm, but they still contribute to a broader, more troubling pattern.

Survey Results

For my research, I had shared my survey on multiple platforms and *Gilmore Girls* spaces online, including Reddit, X (formerly known as Twitter). And while this strategy did lead to a few people taking the survey, I was not too satisfied with the number. So, I reached out to *Gilmore Girls* fan page @thinkergilmore on Instagram, and they have kindly helped me share my survey with their thousands of followers. Through these methods, I have gathered 1,378 responses.

However, for the sake of length, I will be dividing and comparing my survey results under these categories: a) “North America,” and b) “International”: sub-divided into “Europe,” and “Else,” the latter including Asia, the Middle East, Oceania, Latin America, and North Africa.

a) North America (N= 935)

Among the 935 North American respondents, a significant majority (668 respondents) reported watching the show via streaming platforms and engaging in binge-watching years after its original broadcast. Of these viewers, 190 perceived the show’s portrayal of food, particularly its emphasis on excessive junk food consumption, as negative. In contrast, only 38 respondents who viewed the show during its original airing expressed similar concerns. This discrepancy suggests that, at the time of its initial release, the show’s depiction of eating habits was not widely regarded as problematic or abnormal.

Additionally, 538 respondents (57.5%) indicated that they found Rory and Lorelai’s constant consumption of junk food without any visible health or weight-related consequences to be unrealistic. This suggests that only (a little over) half of the North

American sample viewed the characters' eating habits as implausible within a real-world context. And similarly, only a small proportion of North American respondents, 84 individuals, or approximately 8.98%, reported noticing a change in their own eating habits after watching the show. This percentage is notably lower than that reported by international respondents.

b) International: Europe (N= 293)

Within the international sample, respondents from Europe constituted the largest subgroup, with 293 individuals participating in the survey. Of these, 195 respondents (66.6%) reported that they found Rory and Lorelai's eating habits to be unrealistic when compared to their slim body types, indicating a strong perception among European viewers that the characters' dietary behaviors were not reflective of real-life physical outcomes. Furthermore, 36 European participants (12.3%) stated that their own eating habits had changed after watching the show.

International: Else (N= 150)

Among the 150 international respondents from the Middle East, Asia, North Africa, and Oceania, 92 individuals (61.3%) reported that they perceived Rory and Lorelai's eating habits as unrealistic given the characters' consistently slim appearances despite frequent consumption of junk food. Additionally, 32 respondents (21.3%) from this group indicated that their own eating habits changed after watching the show. This is the highest percentage of reported behavioral change across all regional groups, suggesting that international viewers may be particularly susceptible to media influence in relation to food norms and body image.

These findings reveal that perceptions of food realism and the influence in *Gilmore Girls* are shaped significantly by cultural and regional context. North American viewers, likely influenced by similar real-life dietary norms and routines, were more inclined to accept the show's portrayal of excessive junk food consumption without questioning its plausibility or experiencing behavioral impact. In contrast, non-North American viewers (those from Europe and other international regions) demonstrated greater critical awareness of the unrealistic nature of the characters' eating habits and reported higher rates of personal behavioral change. This also shows that what is normalized in one cultural setting may appear exaggerated or even problematic in another.

This duality was also seen when comparing some of the open-ended questions' responses. When asked the question "*Did you see yourself represented in the way the characters approached food? Why or why not?*" Some viewers from North America noted:

"Yes because I tend to stress eat or eat a bunch of food at once whenever I'm just in a certain type of mood."

"I appreciate the sort of "laziness" in not wanting to cook, and more importantly, the lack of shame for eating as much as you want. However, I wish I had the money to always order takeout."

"Yes because I always reached to get more junk than healthier food."

While international viewers' responses to the same question included:

"No - I do not believe it is healthy to eat that way although I understand it's necessity to the storyline and development of the iconic characters and their personalities."

“No, at least not in the girls no. I’ve went through ED recovery before starting the show, and I noticed many of my old habits in Michel’s character. I guess I could relate to Emily slightly—my meals were on the healthier side— but for different reasons. Hers was class, mine was the calories. Same thing goes for Luke actually. His judgment when it came to fast food and stuff like that. But I definitely do NOT see myself in Lorelai and Rory”

“No. I knew it was not real, they didn’t eat like that in real life but we still kinda believed it was?”

Obviously these answers do not speak for *all* North-Americans and *all* internationals, as there are a number of different personal, cultural, and socioeconomic factors that shape how viewers relate to on-screen eating habits. However, the general consensus suggests that international viewers approached these portrayals with far more skepticism than North-American viewers.

Focus Groups

For my focus groups, I initially had asked some close friends who are dedicated fans of the show to participate. However, this proved to be very limiting as most of these friends were strictly from countries that fit under my previously introduced “Else” category. So, in order to find willing participants from around the world to partake in my focus groups, I had added a dedicated area in my survey for those open to it, to write down their email addresses. And once @thinkergilmore had shared my survey with their followers, I managed to get a handful of participants wanting to be a part of my focus groups.

As mentioned earlier, my focus groups have been divided into two: North Americans, and non-North Americans. And in order to compare and contrast these, I will first be discussing them individually.

(As some participants in both samples preferred to remain anonymous, pseudonyms were used to refer to all participants.)

a) Focus Group 1: North Americans

This focus group included five female participants and one male participant. A central theme that was shared was the association of food with comfort and bonding, rather than health or nutrition.

Taylor (27F) from New Jersey mentioned that unhealthy eating for her is “not the type of food being eaten, but the act of overeating in itself.” Similarly, *Sarah (22F)* defined unhealthy eating as a “disconnect between the food choices and the physical health,” and this sentiment was agreed on by *Ben (26M)*.

However, *Ben* noted that the Gilmore girls' eating patterns themselves were not problematic in his eyes because having grown up as an athlete where overeating was normalized to build strength, it was also his norm. To him, the unrealistic part was that they "maintained" their physique without any exercise.

Some participants brought up the relatability of the show's food-centered social rituals. For instance, *Chloe* (24F) from Illinois shared that her family has a tradition of weekly fast food nights with McDonald's, pizzas, and a third rotating takeout restaurant. For her, this made the Gilmore girls' casual junk food consumption feel normal. However, and surprisingly, despite the Friday night dinners being a "family get-together" bonding moment, *this* is where she felt a disconnect. She mentioned that Emily's class-based and formal dinners were hard to relate to, even though they were meant to represent something she and her family did: eating together. She explained that "the type of food we have is part of it." "The messy eating around the coffee table," the loud chewing coming from her younger siblings and the faint noises from the television is what makes those dinners special for her, and Emily's "high-class" food and "good manners" did not help *Chloe* connect with those moments.

Another key thing that had surfaced during my focus group with North Americans is cultural context. For *Nia* (19F), growing up in New York with two working parents, fast food was frequently opted to, and she had only recently begun questioning the normalcy of this frequent fast food consumption after interacting with online friends from Europe. *Nia* mentioned that she has a "Snapchat streak" (a streak that is kept going as long as both participants send photos and videos to the other every single day) with a close friend she met on Reddit, and after realizing how often she would be sending photos of fast

food, in comparison to the friend, she began trying to limit her intake. Another participant, *Jen* (24F) agreed. She stated that she only recognized it as a uniquely American pattern after living with international roommates in college and observing their more home-based and structured eating habits.

Another theme that emerged in the North American focus group is the socioeconomic and occupational factors influencing perception. *Abby* (22F) explained that her eating habits are quite similar to Lorelai and Rory's, however this stemmed not from preference but from necessity, as long work hours often left her relying on nightly takeout.

Finally, *Martha* (early 40s) offered a unique perspective as the only viewer who had seen the show during its original broadcast. She said that when she first watched the show on air over two decades ago, she was indifferent to the characters' eating habits. However, after rewatching it in recent years, she found them not physically implausible, but more importantly also "financially unrealistic."

b) Focus Group 2: Non-North Americans

This focus group consisted of five female and two male participants. A key theme that emerged was the emphasis on food type and quantity when defining unhealthy eating, with a stronger focus on the nutritional content of food rather than just the act of overeating.

Selena (23F) from Germany described unhealthy eating and food as "anything with lots of fats and calories" but added that the way food is consumed (especially in a "binge-style" can make it even worse). Similarly, *Anna* (24F) shared that watching the

Gilmore girls eat excessively made her more conscious of her own eating patterns and body image. She emphasized that the show did not lead her to develop any harmful habits and behaviours, but it made her “more conscious of the act of eating” and compared her own habits to those of Lorelai and Rory’s.

Mariah (23F) said that despite finding the food choices and consumptions unrealistic, it didn’t diminish her enjoyment of the show. She related to their love of food but pointed out that her own upbringing emphasized balance and home-cooked meals. For her, the absence of any cooking in the show was more “weird” than the overeating itself.

On the other hand, *Harry* (21M) from Ireland said that he initially started watching the show with his partner, and one of the first things he noticed was the Gilmore girls’ eating habits. He said that it disrupted his viewing experience, and “instead of focusing on what’s happening,” he’s thinking to himself “how the heck do they eat this much?” He also gave an interesting analogy, comparing the *Gilmore Girls* watching experience to watching a superhero show where the audience expects impossibilities. But he said unlike superhero shows, in a show like *Gilmore Girls*, which is grounded in everyday life, such unrealistic behaviors make the characters harder to connect with.

The contrasting responses between the North American and non-North American focus groups show how cultural frameworks shape perceptions of media consumption, and more specifically food and body image. North American participants tended to view the Gilmore girls’ eating habits through a lens of normalization (often linking it to comfort and bonding), arguably due to the fact that in North America, fast food is ubiquitous. However, participants from other regions were more likely to problematize those same habits.

Limitations

One significant limitation in my study revolves around Michel. This includes both him as a secondary character on the show, and also his attitude towards food and his eating habits.

To start off with the latter, his behavior borders on disordered eating, specifically anorexia nervosa. In my surveys and focus groups, it was especially difficult to gather accurate or detailed responses about Michel's habits, and the way it was perceived or taken by the viewers. Because disordered eating is rarely openly discussed (even more so with males), participants may have hesitated to label his behavior as problematic.. Also, since Michel is a secondary character, some participants may not have paid close attention to his food-related behaviors, and therefore have not really fully assessed the full impact or recognition of his portrayal.

Another limitation in my study naturally comes from the sensitive topics it discusses. There are a lot of social stigmas around eating disorders, body image, and weight, and so talking about one's own eating habits and personal experiences with disordered eating can be deeply vulnerable and emotionally charged. It's very likely that some survey and focus group participants may have undermined or chose not to disclose how the show's portrayal has affected them personally, either due to shame, fear of judgment, or the difficulty of putting such experiences into words. This represents an important gap, as those most impacted by such representations may also be the least likely to speak about them openly.

Conclusion

Gilmore Girls has long been celebrated for its wit and warmth, both during its original airing, and its recent resurgence and gained popularity on social media. But beneath its coziness lies a complex web of messages about food, bodies, and control, that reflect the cultural attitudes about eating, particularly in its easy 2000s context.

For North American viewers, the series serves as both a mirror and magnifier of their own cultural anxieties surrounding body image and food consumption, where the juxtaposition of eating fast food yet maintaining a slender figure can be seen as an exaggerated portrayal of the unattainable ideals of beauty. This often reflects broader societal pressures unique to Western cultures.

In contrast, international audiences interpret the same themes through their own cultural lenses, where the standards of beauty and food practices may differ, leading to a range of reactions. In this way, *Gilmore Girls* not only offers a snapshot of 2000s American society but also acts as a point of (dis)connection and dissonance for global viewers, showing how cultural context shapes the interpretation of food and body ideals.

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