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Chocolate Delights: Gender and Consumer Indulgence

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Does the notion of chocolate preclude the concept of free will? (Boynton 1982, p. 64)

The need for chocolate or other sweets, like liquor for some, drugs or one sole lover more than any other—shrug the question that has no answered: what makes one person need another this way? Until the way is gone—sweet mouthing and melting chocolate whatever you crave as comfort or just desert, but should not have because it rots the teeth or stains the heart, learn to do without (Cheever 1980, p. 5).

MRS. PEARCE: Mr Higgins: you're tempting the girl. It's not right. She should think of the future.
HIGGINS: At her age! Nonsense! Time enough to think of the future when you haven't any future to think of. No, Eliza: do as this lady does: think of other people's futures; but never think of your own. Think of chocolates, and taxis, and gold, and diamonds.
LIZA: No: I don't want no gold and no diamonds. I'm a good girl, I am (Shaw 1913).

In this scene from Pygmalion, Liza Doolittle refuses to be tempted by extravagant and distant promises of gold and diamonds. However the more modest and immediate luxuries of taking taxis and eating chocolate creams prove too much for her to resist. Chocolate candies, while they are a widely available consumer good, continue to be seen as treats, temptations, and little luxuries. We see eating chocolate as indulging our selfish, and perhaps even sinful, desires. And we continue to view women and children as being much more susceptible to such indulgence. Men, by contrast, are seen as stronger willed and as less likely to abandon self-control and succumb to the pleasures of chocolate consumption. Werner Sombart (1967, pp. 98-100) cites women's inability to resist their desires for sweets as being one of the key factors precipitating the rise of capitalism in Europe.

Such gendered views of chocolate consumption suggested to us that by studying how men and women feel about chocolate we might learn something about the broader stereotype that women are the consummate consumers of the Western world. Thus, in the present qualitative study we sought to investigate men's and women's memories, associations, thoughts, desires, and patterns of consumption involving chocolate. In doing so we encountered an emotionally charged area of consumer behavior that may help inform more general understandings of the roles of luxury, desire, indulgence, pleasure, reward, control, and gender in consumption.
CHOCOLATE AS A CONSUMER LUXURY

Chocolate consumption began several thousand years before the Spanish conquest of Mesoamerica and was reserved for the elite men of the region: kings, aristocrats, merchants, and warriors (Coe and Coe 1996). When Hernando Cortez arrived in 1519, cacao was grown for the Aztecs by their Mayan subjects and was consumed as a frothy chocolate drink thought to have aphrodisiac properties. Montezuma reportedly drank as much as 50 cups a day from golden chalices. After conquering Montezuma's empire, Cortez introduced the drink to the Spanish court in 1528. The Spanish King, Charles V, was so enamored of chocolate that he had cocoa beans secretly processed in a Spanish monastery, giving the Spanish a European monopoly on the beverage for nearly a century (Fuller 1994). The Spanish added sugar (also from the New World) and vanilla to the drink and established cocoa plantations in the Caribbean and on an island off the West Coast of Africa (Coady 1995). Chocolate remained a luxury drink that was especially popular among Spanish ladies, whom one Jesuit priest described as “addicted to black chocolate” (Acosta 1590, quoted in Coe and Coe 1996, p. 112). It soon gained favor among the rich and powerful in Portugal, Italy, Germany, England, and France as well. In 1615 when the Spanish Princess Anne married King Louis XIII of France, she brought along the recipe for chocolate as part of her dowry (Mintz 1988). The first chocolate house opened in London in 1657 and such establishments soon became the rage among the middle and upper social classes throughout Europe (Coe and Coe 1996). Conservative Protestants did not oppose chocolate as they did other New World imports of rum, coffee, and tobacco. In England Quakers praised the beverage as a healthy alternative to gin (Young 1984).

By 1730 the price of chocolate had dropped to the equivalent of $3 per pound, bringing it within financial reach of a much broader range of people (Fuller 1994). Still, chocolate remained a beverage rather than a solid. There is evidence of earlier solid chocolate confectionaries made in the Catholic monasteries of Mexico (Coe and Coe 1996), but it was not until the nineteenth century that production inventions in Europe led to the sorts of chocolate that we know today (Nuttall 1988). Prominent mass manufacturers of chocolate who started businesses in this period included English Quakers (Frys, Roundtree, Terry, Cadbury), Swiss Calvinists (Suchard, Nestlé, Lindt, Tobler), and an American Mennonite (Hershey). Their business successes seem to bear out Weber's interpretation of the influence of the Protestant Ethic, but consumer demand for the newly affordable luxury of chocolate candies was equally important (Coe and Coe 1996). Advertising, luxurious packaging, and the creation of specialty gift chocolate boxes, such as the heart-shaped Valentine’s Day box introduced by Richard Cadbury in 1861 helped to stimulate consumer desires for chocolates as well (Fuller 1994). Chocolate candy bars started with the Hershey Bar in 1905 (Wyman 1993).

Despite the democratization of the chocolate market with the advent of mass production and the corresponding decrease in the price of some chocolate confections, chocolate remains a very special food. Unlike tea and coffee which have become everyday foods and are consumed with certain meals, chocolate has never become a mundane everyday essential (Cox 1993). James (1990) calls it a liminal foodstuff: halfway between ordinary food (which we see as nutritious) and junk food (which we view as worthless non-food). Chocolate is instead an extraordinary food that is not likely to be a staple part of ordinary diets. If it were ordinary, chocolate would not be as appropriate as it is to serve at festive occasions like birthdays, Christmas, and Easter, as well as Japanese White Day, Hindu Divali, Mexican Dia de los Muertos, and the Muslim post-Ramadan feast (Moeran and
It would not be appropriate to give as a gift. It would not be associated with sex and seduction. And it is unlikely that people would have such a fondness for it that they would call themselves “addicted,” “chocoholics,” and “chocolate freaks.” Yet chocolate, despite its democratized availability, the religious roots of many of its early manufacturers, and its popular (if mistaken) associations with acne, calories, and tooth decay, is a sumptuous as well as “naughty” luxury good. Imagine trying to substitute “corn,” “soup,” or “cereal” for “chocolate” in the following responses from focus groups conducted in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles (Fuchs 1983):

“Chocolate is fun!”
“Chocolate is one of those ‘little extras’ I allow myself, even when I can’t afford a new suit.”
“Chocolate is my passion. I love it.”
“Chocolate is sexy. I especially enjoy sharing it with my boyfriend in bed.”
“It makes me feel special, and when I give good chocolate as a gift, I can see it makes (the recipient) feel special, too!”
“Chocolate is like ‘forbidden fruit.’ I know I shouldn’t eat it, ‘cause of its bad effects, but I can’t stay away.”

It is clear from such comments that chocolate not only remains a special luxury good, but that it has retained its ancient associations with sex while acquiring additional strong symbolic meanings as well.

CHOCOLATE, CONSUMPTION, AND WOMEN

One change in the symbolic meaning of chocolate since its Mesoamerican origins is from being an elite male prerogative to being a female consumer good. We see this as a critical juncture. The full gendered dimension of chocolate consumption became such that women were seen as in need of control, sweet rather than serious, diminutive, associated with consumption and to be consumed, as well as weak, romantic and sexual. The gendered hierarchy and its associated meanings are pervasive, subscribed to at some level by both men and women. Thus, self-proclaimed chocoholics are predominantly women (Barthel 1989). The recipients of chocolate gifts are far more likely to be women than men (Lupton 1996; Savel 1977). In Anglo-Saxon countries women consume about twice as much chocolate as men (Hamilton 1992; Nuttall 1988). The other group that consumes a disproportionate amount of chocolates and other sweets is children, and many of us still associate chocolates with memories of childhood and holidays (Barthel 1989). It is also women and children who receive a disproportionate share of sweet terms of endearment such as “sugar,” “sweetie pie,” “sweetheart,” “honey,” and “honey bunch” (James 1990; Willis 1991). Coward (1984) attributes the use of such terms to the historic position of chocolate and sugar as luxuries, such that these sweet endearments connote rarity, value, and preciousness. Mintz (1993) suggests instead that sugar and chocolate may be better thought of as psychologically addictive “drug foods.” This implies that the use of sweet terms of endearment connote our irresistible desire for the loved one to whom these terms are applied. Another possibility is that we call women and children by sweet names as a diminutive tag that associates them with their apparent fondness and “weakness” for sweet indulgences. As the English nursery rhyme has it, it is little girls who are made of “sugar and spice and everything nice.” Other meanings of chocolate and sweets -- associating them with sensuousness, romance, happiness, and comfort -- either emphasize the use of these sweet treats by men to tempt and seduce women (Barthel 1989; Hamilton 1992) or by parents to control, bribe, and reward children, as well as compensate them for the parent’s absence (Charles and Kerr 1988; Lupton 1996).
A further association with eating chocolate involves feelings of decadence, guilt, and sinfulness. These feelings likely stem from both the lack of will power associated with chocolate consumption and from attributions of excessiveness, over-eating, and obesity commonly assigned to chocolate consumers (Barthel 1989). More broadly, these associations might be seen as expressing angst over surrendering ourselves to pleasure-seeking consumer desires. As Barthel argues, “Self-pleasuring and shopping achieve a visceral link as the positively reinforced identity of the chocoholic becomes a primordial insatiability, a childlike delight in expense” (1989, p. 432). Through the lens of dominant notions equating female beauty with being impossibly slim and youthful, the simple pleasures of chocolate consumption come to loom as sins of Biblical proportions. In addition chocolate is perceived as unhealthy and as demonstrating a lack of self-control (Lupton 1996).

Or could it be instead, that all these negative associations are merely attempts to deny women an otherwise innocent pleasure? As Tiger (1992) suggests, if we control peoples’ pleasures we control them as well. Control may involve outright censorship, prohibition, and sumptuary laws (as with chocolate among the pre-Columbian Aztecs) or it may involve more subtle social rewards and sanctions. As a result of these more subtle pressures and the sensuous allure of sweets, Cox (1993) maintains, there is a strong love-hate relationship among women toward chocolate, resulting in binging, purging, and other addictive food disorders. However, Weil and Rosen (1983) argue that while people may be addicted to and crave the sugar and fat in chocolate, chocolate itself, at least in moderation, is not addictive.

Boynton’s (1982) chocolate humor, the growing presence of chocolate web sites, and “chocoholic” support groups (Young 1984) all suggest that social anxiety about chocolate consumption remains. At the same time, the existence of tongue-in-cheek “evil” chocolate advertising appeals and food names (e.g., “death by chocolate,” “the chocolate temptress, wickedly rich” — James 1990) imply we also have a fascination with its sinful connotations of chocolate as a forbidden food. This fascination invokes the transgressive character that Bataille (1991) insists lies behind much of human desire. In this view, because it is taboo, its consumption is all the more thrilling. Even without its transgressive character however, it is clear that chocolate simply tastes very good, feels very good as it melts in our mouths (Hamilton 1992), and can be used very effectively to enhance our moods and reward ourselves (Elliot 1991).

It is useful to consider the critiques of chocolate against a background of critiques of women’s consumption more generally. As Berry (1994) documents, luxury consumption has long been disparaged as being effeminate, debilitating, and weakening. He notes, for example, that: Juvenal’s Satires (see especially Satire 6) are notorious for drawing out a misogynous association of the wantonness and irresponsibility of women with a society given over to wealth and luxury. On a more general level, these connexions between women, beasts and uncontrollable, therefore less rational, behaviour do, as feminists point out, reflect the assumption that it is males who embody what is distinctive about humanity (p. 77). Christianity’s story of Eve tempting Adam into sinful consumption can also be seen as expressing this link between women and luxury. The insatiable rapacious desire of women for luxury goods is also the image drawn in the classic novels about early department stores: Zola’s (1958) Au Bonheur des dames and Dreissier’s (1981) Sister Carrie (see Vinken 1995; Bowlby 1985). Historic analyses of department stores have supported these
images, while characterizing male department store marketers as “seducing” women into a dream world of luxury goods in elegant and fawning settings (Benson 1979; Reekie 1993; Williams 1982). Certainly women were the targets for new consumer goods and novelties even earlier than this (Jones 1996). Women also were driven more than men to become shoplifters in early department stores, presumably due to the intense consumer desires that these stores aroused (Abelson 1989; Cammi 1995; Hutter 1987). A similar characterization of women as avaricious consumers of luxury goods is found in films (Doane 1987; Friedberg 1993). Furthermore, these are not all simply misogynist stereotypes. There is a strong, although not exclusive, association between women and consumption of various sorts (Firat 1991; Fischer and Gainer 1991). Just as men may fear women’s unchecked sexual desires, they may fear their unbridled consumer desires as well. Thus, imposition of control and exhortations to self-control may not only play out a set of masculine values, but may also be an attempt to counter the fears of unconstrained female desire.

It is against this background that we sought to study gender and chocolate consumption. Given the entanglement of chocolate consumption in the more general critiques of luxury and female consumption, how do men and women view their own chocolate consumption? Are childhood experiences and memories of chocolate consumption fond recollections, or are they steeped in guilt? How do men and women differ in their feelings about chocolate? These were the major questions we set out to investigate.

**DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

The data utilized in this study were collected by students trained in graduate and undergraduate qualitative research courses at a large state university in the western United States. As partial fulfillment of requirements for the course, students were directed to conduct a 30-minute observation at a site where human interaction focused on the sale/purchase, consumption and/or production of chocolate. Each observation was recorded as a multi-sensory thick description, with students also instructed to consider briefly such issues as meaning, tone and interpretation of the behaviors and settings they observed. The total number of separate observations available for analysis was 28.

We also instructed students to conduct one self-interview and two depth interviews with individual informants. Although students were given the option of interviewing either marketers or consumers of chocolate, the majority chose consumers. They were also instructed to choose one male and one female informant, and to choose at least one individual who was a member of a generation different than that of the interviewer him/herself. The sample of interviewees includes 46 males and 38 females ranging in age from 4 to 80 years. The interviews were semi-standardized; the students were trained in open-ended depth interviewing techniques but were also instructed to probe all informants concerning certain issues such as gift-giving and memories as they relate to chocolate and their personal history with chocolate. Students were encouraged to use projective techniques toward the end of their interviews. In addition, two focus groups concerning feelings, perceptions and uses of chocolate were conducted by the instructors of the classes, using class members as focus group participants. Each focus group had approximately ten male and female participants.

Records of the observations, interviews and focus groups became part of the data archive for the class and for this study and were imported into ZINDEX, a qualitative research computer program, for organizational and analytical purposes. We analyzed data using an
open coding frame initially, followed by selective coding. Although numerous themes
emerged from the data, we focus here on gender and social interactions, various emotions
and feelings, perceptions of luxury, indulgence and decadence, and issues of unmitigated
desire and the need for control.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data, we find that chocolate consumption is a complex behavior, surrounded
with various meanings, perceptions, attitudes and emotions. In our own analyses and
those of our students, emergent themes included perceptions of good and evil; sensations
of taste and texture; notions of health and illness; references to prestige and class or lack
thereof; memories of celebrations and ritualistic consumption; themes of love and
sexuality; hoarding and hiding, as well as addictive behaviors; gift-giving and receiving,
and emotional aspects of consumption concerning fulfillment, satisfaction, comfort,
happiness, deservedness, guilt, stress and depression. Many of these themes exhibited a
gender dimension. For our purposes, we will consider the most salient of these coded
categories, with special emphasis on gendered aspects and implications.

Social, Hedonic, Sexual and Emotional Aspects of Chocolate Consumption

Our informants indicate that social, hedonic and emotional aspects of chocolate
consumption are interrelated. While both men and women use chocolate in social
situations, women more frequently use chocolate to mark occasions of special bonding
with other women. Such occasions can be joyful or sorrowful, and the emotion of a
separate event can precipitate the chocolate consumption. Alternatively, chocolate
consumption can become an event in and of itself. Our female informants remembered
these events fondly:

...my friends got together in college for dinner, which was an occasion, and we
would have eight forks and devour any chocolate item (FC26joan.int)

I often feel that it is a fun thing to share with girlfriends, to eat something really
decadent and really chocolatey together. We make comments about how we know
we shouldn't be eating that particular dish but that we deserve it (FC30kaw.sli).

I: How do you feel about chocolate?
R: I think it's the best thing on the planet. It's really good.
I: What makes you feel that way?
R: The taste. And I guess it's more psychological than anything. I guess
associating it with, like, good things that happen. When I eat chocolate it makes me
feel better...When I eat, when I consume chocolate with groups that I know it is
usually we're having fun or something. So, when I am not feeling so good about
something I go and I eat chocolate. And it kind of helps me feel better. So, it kind
of reminds me of the times I have with, like, friends. Because that is the normal
time I eat chocolate (FC19alli.int)

Chocolate consumption as an adjunct, even remedy, for emotional situations, need not
occur in groups. Again, while both men and women associate chocolate consumption with
various emotions, women are far more likely to mention emotions and to discuss the
emotions at length and in various forms. Our informants often mentioned emotions
ranging from depression, sadness and guilt to joy, freedom, success, fulfillment and even
sexual pleasure. The following quotes from both observations and interviews indicate happiness and reward associated with chocolate consumption:

...Men had been buying a lot right now, but it was mostly women that bought chocolate from them. The clerk said that when women came to buy from her they made excuses for buying chocolate. For example, one lady had a bad day and yet another had just broken a relationship. Another lady had a headache. The instance cure for them was chocolate. It seemed to meet their emotional needs...In analyzing and then participating in eating chocolate I could understand why people liked chocolate. I couldn’t observe motivations of the females who bought chocolate, but I could sympathize with some of them since I knew why I usually bought chocolate. I buy when I’m happy and sometimes when I’m sad. I guess these women were buying chocolate as a reward because they made it through the day or week. They might have been buying chocolate to get over a failure in their life such as the broken relationship...The men looked to be upset because they had to stop and buy for their “women” while the women looked happy because they were getting their chocolate (coco.obs).

I feel like it set me free kind of. It was something that I could just go for and utterly enjoy it no matter what was going on in my life. (FC26acct.int)

If the chocolate is anything short of the type that can make my eyes roll back in my head with ecstasy, then I will not be able to fully appreciate it...I want chocolate to take me away. To temporarily block out all other senses that I am experiencing and focus on the chocolate and the chocolate alone (MC32paul.sfl)

Thus, chocolate is associated with making one ‘feel better.’ This association goes beyond mere coincidence of experience and product. Informants indicated they actually use chocolate to make them feel better, as a reward, and/or to ‘take them away’ to another, more pleasurable realm, to block out the negative parts of their daily lives.

Moreover, the focus of many informants on the sensual aspects of chocolate consumption, emphasizing its taste and texture and the resulting feelings of fulfillment and joy, goes beyond sensuality into sexuality. For some, chocolate consumption is equated with sexual experiences and orgasm. Consider the following observed incident, for example:

Two college-aged women had purchased a small bag of what must have been their favorite chocolates. After having made the purchase, they walked toward the door, delayed, huddled together, reached for a couple of pieces from the bag, and bit into them. While both women clearly enjoyed the treat, the more expressive of the two closed her eyes as she bit into her chocolate, went into a slow-motion bite/chew movement, puffed out her lips, slowly pulled the treat away from her mouth and let out a low, subtle, groan of satisfaction. She then said to her friend in a low, but assured voice, “This is simply orgasmic...I could live on these things.” The other woman nodded her head and replied with similar expression, “Mm hmm.” (wheaton.obs)

Similarly, other informants referred to chocolate in sexual ways, as an aphrodisiac:

I: What do you consider a substitute chocolate to be?
R: Sex! Now if I could only have that! (MC25dark.int)

It seems to act as an aphrodisiac (FC40mela.int)
I eat it when I crave it.... my attitude towards chocolate is....it is good for you...it should be a healthy food item...it is an aphrodisiac too. I know you don’t believe that, but it is, I have read studies on it (FC20lynn.int).

...chocolate has the same effect on people as sex, and that’s why I’m addicted to it (choc_obs.obs)

However, chocolate is associated also with negative feelings. It is used to alleviate depression and sadness, but it may engender feelings of guilt as well. Thus, like a rose with thorns or a double-edged sword, a love of chocolate and its beneficial effects has its downside. Some of our informants use chocolate to ‘escape,’ others use it for the purpose of consolation:

A lot of people each chocolate when they are depressed...when they are low for some reason. (FC55anna.int)

M&Ms? They are like pick-me-ups. Yeah, see if you’re having kind a rough day you know, you buy a bag of M&Ms, pop a few. You know, go through the day pop a few more. Okay, it’s not a drug I know, but still (FC19alli.int).

It is worth it to me to continue with what I am doing [eating chocolate], at least until some of my real stresses are off of me (FC27hcj.int)

The guilt which may follow is difficult for many women in particular, and it recalled for us both the feminist issue of body image for women and the topics of pleasure and related guilt. Women may feel that they do not deserve the good feelings that chocolate engenders, or they may simply feel guilty because they have been socialized into believing that chocolate is unhealthy through its fat, sugar and/or caffeine content:

I: If chocolate were an animal what would it be?
R: Dangerous. I guess it would be a tiger or a lion.
I: Why dangerous? Why a lion?
R: Because for the obvious reasons. Chocolate is so fattening but I really like it. It is dangerous for me to have around no matter what type. (FC35jane.int)

Today, I still eat chocolate in some form or another, but I am more health conscious about my selections. I’ll have sugar-free hot chocolate, sugar-free, fat-free chocolate pudding, or split some with my husband. I’m much more aware of the fat and calories in chocolate than I used to be when I was younger (FC29)

Chocoholism

Informants often referred to “Chocoholism” or addiction to chocolate. While addiction would seem to be a very negative attribute of consumption, our informants clearly did not see chocoholism as negative as they presumably would have found addiction to heroin, cocaine, or even alcohol or cigarettes to be. Many informants were self-proclaimed “chocoholics,” and others frequently referred to friends or relatives in this way.

I know people who buy ten bags of chocolate chips and put them in storage...you know, chocoholics (MC26geo.int)

I am a “chocoholic” and most people who know me at all are aware of this fact. (FC26jane.slf)
I: Are you addicted to chocolate?
R: Yes I am [Her statement is proud]
I: How long have you felt you were addicted?
R: I would say about 10 years.

For some, chocoholism may be an excuse that helps them avoid the issue of guilt. Thus, if one is 'addicted' to chocolate, that is, if one cannot help oneself in terms of the need for chocolate consumption, then the negative feelings of remorse and guilt can be sidelined. For most, however, chocolate consumption is both an irresistible, potent experience and an occasion for feeling guilt.

Because they find chocolate consumption to be such a compelling experience, and perhaps because they and others also associate too much chocolate consumption with being out of control, addicted, unhealthy or simply inappropriate behavior, some female informants commented that they steal, hide or hoard their chocolate. This again may be interpreted from a societal perspective in which women must hide satisfying consumption objects, must be secretive about "guilty pleasures." Alternatively, some women indicated they hide the chocolate simply because they do not want to share the chocolate with others.

I got a box of chocolate the other day, some good ones and I promptly took them and hid them under the bed (FC27hcj.int)

My mother would buy a package of Nestle’s Semi-Sweet Chocolate Morsels. She would claim to be saving them for chocolate chip cookies, but she would actually hide them in a cupboard in the kitchen and snack on them throughout the day (MC27dave.int)

I would steal it like I do with my grandma. I stole her chocolate (FC20lynn.int)

I would sneak whole packages of chocolate chips from my mom’s kitchen. I would also sneak chocolate frosting packages and eat them in my room (FC27mary.int)

I don’t want anyone to even see that I have it...that’s when I would probably sneak (FC26acct.int)

Finally, while chocoholism was typically referred to as a female experience or was discussed as a personal experience by women, one man indicated:

When I eat it every day I almost feel like an alcoholic who takes a drink from a bottle in his coat pocket. Having children has also made me more aware of my chocolate consumption. Unless I hide it from them, which in and of itself makes me feel guilty, then they notice when I eat it and I feel like I am not setting a good example for them (MC28bike.int)

Chocolate as a Luxurious and Decadent Product

We find that chocolate continues to be perceived as a luxury product. It invokes feelings of wealth and prestige, particularly when the type of chocolate purchased and consumed is an esteemed brand such as Godiva. While other brands or types of chocolate are less desirable, virtually all chocolate consumption is viewed with emotions and perceptions similar to those associated with the consumption of other luxury products. For example, one informant suggested:
You've got to have the brand name stuff. Because if you are going to go luxury, go luxury...Make it more of a luxury item...Chocolate is a luxury (MC30john.int)

The association of chocolate with luxury is probably most obvious in our projective data. In response to the query, "if chocolate were a car, what kind of a car would it be?," informants indicated:

A Cadillac, probably, because good chocolate is expensive. Also, because it is elegant, luxurious...(MC26bill.slf)

Ferrari. Ferraris are expensive and so is chocolate usually. Chocolate is something given by the more wealthy. Chocolate is flashy. (MC25fred.int)

Something that's a luxury car, and of course unneeded. Like a BMW convertible (MC60tomg.int)

Mercedes...I like the Mercedes brand car better than anything else...I just love the way it handles and the way it feels, and I think it's just good quality. And that's what you like in chocolate (MC80mary.int)

However, as suggested by the literature, consumption of a luxury can be viewed as bad, even evil. In this way, chocolate consumption is associated with temptation and sin: chocolate is the worst temptation for me. I even buy it sometimes when I'm not even very hungry, but I need some kind of satisfaction from something or some comfort (MC27hfc.int)

...elegant chocolates and desserts...Just sinfully rich and good (MC80mary.int).

At this point, consumption of chocolate again varies and is affected by gender. Chocolate consumption may be laden with fear and remorse, may be associated with negative body images, and typically is thought to be unhealthy. Many informants indicated chocolate is "fattening," "decadent," "dangerous," and makes them feel "guilty" when they consume it. We found such references much more often in interviews with women, in self-interviews by women, or in situations where reference is made specifically to women. Men are more likely to express their own chocolate consumption in positive terms, referring to it as "an energy boost" (MC47dude.int), providing "for the day's energy" (MC25jojo.slf), and even "a food group" (MC29wait.int). Men seem to feel guilty only if they eat chocolate at inappropriate times, eat too much at one sitting, or buy overly expensive chocolate (MC28bike.slf; MC30hank.int; FG1). On the other hand, women often feel guilty even if they only consume a small amount. Women related chocolate consumption to lapses in control and the assumed outcome of gaining weight.

Gender also seems to be a factor in perceptions and judgements of others who consume chocolate. Men were more likely to refer to chocolate consumers in negative terms such as "lazy" (MC47dude.int), "obnoxious" (MC59army.int), "out of control" (MC33inl.int); and "disgusting, unmotivated slobs" (MC23tay.int). In some cases, men sought to control women's consumption of chocolate. One researcher observed:

males denying their girlfriends...the female(s) expressed desire, but were brutally denied the treat! One girl said, 'Oh, I think I'd like some chocolate, would you like some?' 'Nope, and neither do you'...A woman in her late twenties, somewhat overweight, asked her friend to buy her a chocolate bar, whereby he replied, 'I really don't think you should.' (Choco.obs)
My husband is always on my case telling me that I eat too many sweets  
(FC3Okaw.int)

I think that my wife eats too much chocolate, and I am always on her case about it  
(MC30vehw.int)

In the references in which men provided very negative descriptions of people who consume chocolate, they typically were referring to women. In general, our informants indicated that chocolate consumption is more a problem for women than it is for men. Even when it is not a problem per se, informants believe chocolate consumption is a behavior more likely to be undertaken by women. They suggested:

...women like chocolate much more than men...Generally, a lot of men I’ve known don’t like sweets as much, nor do they have the need to have a fix. I think that is more biological. (FG1)

I think women love chocolate...It seems like most of the people that I can think of that are bigger candy eaters are girls, women...They were just brought up that way and women get presents all the time. And women get chocolate presents...there’s a girl at work that likes chocolates, like candy. Most of the people that come to mind are females. Must be genetic (MC40elli.int).

CONCLUSIONS

Our findings support the conclusions of other scholars who have worked on the topic of both historic and current chocolate consumption. We found that chocolate consumption in American society continues to be emotionally charged and is associated with such feelings as pleasure, joy, and success or, alternatively, with sorrow, depression and guilt. We see this as similar in some ways to the consumer ambivalence discussed by Otnes et al (1997), but expressed as fully developed, extremist attitudes and emotions, often held simultaneously and contradictorily. The intimate association of chocolate with these emotions has precipitated an interesting consumption behavior whereby some of our informants actually use chocolate to induce or to counteract these emotions in a form of mood management. While chocolate is known to have positive physical effects basically attributable to its chemical composition, this particular consumption behavior apparently is based at least partially on the association of the substance with social events and emotional states. The mere mention of chocolate can make people smile, memories of its consumption are pleasurable, reliving the experiences, even in the context of an interview, can be uplifting, without actual consumption taking place. And when our informants do consume chocolate, it is sometimes beyond pleasurable—it is an ecstatic, almost indescribable feeling, moving for some into the metaphorical realm of sexual experience and orgasm.

Echoing its historical development, and despite its democratization and current general availability, chocolate continues to be perceived as a luxury product. Our informants found its consumption to be an extraordinary experience, one they associate--and save for--festive or social events, or for those requiring chocolate’s emotionally uplifting effects. Its consumption continues to be luxurious, liminal, and an antidote for everyday, mundane experiences. For many it approaches the sacred. Certainly, there is some basis for thinking of chocolate as ritual, as described by Driver (1991), functioning in terms of societal order, communitas and transformation.
However, as suggested by Berry (1994), Barthel (1989) and Lupton (1996), chocolate consumption often is also perceived to border on decadence. When it is consumed in what is believed to be an overly indulgent fashion or in immoderate quantities, it can induce guilt. Issues of control emerge. Consumers may believe they must exert self-control; or others may attempt to exert such control over them. The dimensions of guilt, uncontrolled desire, and the need for restraint may induce hoarding, hiding, even stealing. Consumers may attempt to counteract negative perceptions by proclaiming themselves to be victims of some version of addiction or "chocoholism."

Throughout our database, we find gender stereotypes and gender issues. Women tend to discuss the social, hedonic and emotional aspects of chocolate consumption at greater length and in greater detail than do men. Women associate chocolate with a broader range of emotions, and they more freely discuss the use of chocolate as an antidote for negative states.

Importantly, women also see themselves, and are seen by men, as overly indulgent and in need of control. It was only men in our study who used very pejorative terms in referring to chocolate consumers. And men were observed, recorded, and referred to as engaged in active control, almost policing, of women's consumption of chocolate. This goes beyond Lupton's discussion of the perception that chocolate consumption is "unhealthy." Rather, it seems to move into the arena of controlling desire in order to control the individual. Berry's suggestion of luxury consumption as associated with "the wantonness and irresponsibility of women" (1994, p.77) is recalled. It is cultured, civilized, rational men who must control the overly desirous, decadent, weak women. Consumption is moderated; humanity is saved.

Thus, while chocolate consumption in American society exhibits some distinctive characteristics that are shared by both men and women, the consumption behavior and associated perceptions support established historic and present-day stereotypes of women as the arch consumers of luxurious, emotion-laden products. Overall, the discourse of chocolate consumption in American society fits well with the established gender hierarchy, where women are weak and in need of control, small and susceptible, consumers and consumed. Thus, it is perceived by both men and women alike that it is women who are more vulnerable to the allures of chocolate consumption in American society. It is women who are more likely to become addicted and to engage in negative social behavior associated with that addiction. And it is women who, if they cannot control their own destructive consumption impulses, must be controlled by their more stoic, rational, and unemotional counterparts, men.

END NOTES

1) Quotes are followed by file names in parentheses. In interviews, the first character refers to male (M) or female (F) informant; the second character marks the informant as A consumer (C) or marketer (M) of chocolate. The next two characters refer to the informant's age, followed by four characters indicating an assigned pseudonym. Three suffix characters refer to the file as an interview (.int) or self-interview (.slf). Observation file names typically do not include information concerning sex or age but are simply a pseudonym, followed by the suffix (.obs). Interview passages may include reference to the interviewer (I) and the respondent (R).
2) In fact, one of our student groups based their entire analysis on the notions of good and evil in chocolate consumption. This analysis by Rob Wheaton and John Boyd suggested that good and evil interact in peoples’ perceptions of chocolate. They found this to be the case in data grouped into coded themes of taste, ownership, health, temperature/weather, memories, emotion, availability, gifts, cost/class and mind set.

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