But Why Lemons?
What Lemon Consumption Reveals About Validation

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I've always had an affinity for sour foods. There's something so special about the way the tartness melts my taste buds down to rubber and the bitter pangs force my lips apart and inject more of that pungent flavor. In elementary school, I was a bit trendier when incorporating deadly acid into my lunch. Warheads, a sour candy that enticed consumers with increasing levels of sourness to conquer, were all the craze at the time. I loved to pop multiple in my mouth at once and swish them around to prolong the flavor. Some would call my ability to effortlessly consume these sour foods impressive as I was the only one in the class who could do it with a straight face. I guess I had fun showing off.

All these years of injecting acid into my mouth eventually allowed me to upgrade to a real food when I was in middle school – lemons. That is to say I would pack lemons for lunch and eat them. Whole. My peers always found this habit quite weird, but I took it with pride. I would cut the lemon in half and scoop out its insides with a smile painted across my face. I would love to brag about my empty peel to my friends like I had slain some foul beast. As I would taunt my classmates with my rigid yellow peels, I would always receive the same, simple question – why? What was so attractive about these lemons? They're painful to eat, there can be much debate on whether they have an actual flavor, and wouldn't an orange or something do the trick? The answer is rooted in basic psychology. Much of lemon consumption can be interpreted through the lens of social validation. Lemon-eaters like me satisfy their basic sociological need for outside approval and affirmation through the comically unpleasant fruit.

Lemons & Social Validation

As humans are social creatures, we rely heavily on the approval of those around us. Psychologist Timothy Jeider from Nevada Mental Health said it best: "When our internal sense of worth fails, whether from not ever properly being built [due to issues in childhood development], mental illness sabotaging it, or just having a bad day of doubting ourselves, that's when we turn to approval" (Jeider qtd. in Ferguson). I'm sure you can attest to how a sweet compliment from a stranger can brighten a gloomy day, or how a loving gesture from a loved one can help you overcome life's challenges. This may paint validation as an unnecessary sweet lemon bar on top of your dinner, but science proves that validation is as important as the lemon-roasted chicken! According to researchers at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, emotional validation from our mothers lays the groundwork for basic emotional awareness (Lambie & Lindberg, 2016). The impact of this validation in childhood is profound, contributing to positive well-being and mental

health well into adulthood. Another study of midwestern college students found that reassurance from others (as well as from the self) can curve anxiety by 41% and depression by 50% (Wu and Wei). Science shows that validation is a vital part of our human development, emphasizing validation as not just a pleasant addition to our lives but as a fundamental need.

Understanding what external validation looks like helps us appreciate why it plays such a crucial role in our emotional well-being and overall development. Psychologist Tina Saxena at Medium defines it as "means that we rely on others or external sources for our sense of self" (Saxena). In other words, we value the "opinions, judgments, feedback" and actions of others when defining our self-worth, which is directly correlated with our overall emotional stability. If society generally responds positively to you, you will have a stronger sense of self and are more likely to be happy overall (Lyubomirsky and Tkach). The opposite is true if people have poor opinions and judgments about you. How does this correlate with my actions in middle school? Well, it is also clear young people are willing to go to great lengths to receive this external validation as it is intertwined with our mental being.

Research at both Temple University and the University of Washington found that teens were more likely to engage in risky behaviors to seem impressive to their peers (Sparks). Though eating lemons is not classically defined as a "risky behavior," there is no guarantee that your peers would see your lemon munchies in a positive light, and there's a valid risk in that. We all know that kid who would always brag about their perfect grades, and that was annoying because we all wished we would be like them. Yet perhaps you found the kid who could solve a Rubix cube in a couple of seconds exciting because we were fine living without that skill. Lemon eating fits more cleanly in that second category, but even then, bragging is a risky social behavior.

Whether your peers interpret your boastfulness as arrogance or talent is up to fate. Yet, because my friends saw my sour food consumption as impressive, I felt stronger than them. This served to boost both my external and internal validation. Bonus points for engaging in risky behavior that would not upset my principal.

Evidence also suggests that internal validation is just as vital a part of social validation as external validation. Personal self-care techniques like positive affirmations and meditation have been linked to heightened "decision-making, empathy, and emotional regulation" (Arabi). Thus, self-validation makes you a better communicator with your peers and increases overall happiness. This feeds your ability to receive positive approval from others, and the cycle continues.

Not only does eating lemons make me look cool, but it makes me *feel* cool, and that is just as important. The pride in my achievement gives me confidence, a confidence that mitigates any negative opinions I may receive on my lemons (or anything about me, for that matter), and a new willingness to try more daring things (maybe some hot sauce is next). Lemons are not just about the approval of others but about the approval of self.

You Eat Lemons?!

Let's face it – lemons are not an attractive food. When was the last time you were sitting around and thought "I want to eat a lemon right now." That's why the #lemonchallenge blew up

in 2022 (Ewe). Trazia Rae Williams posted a video of her spontaneously eating a lemon wedge to her TikTok account that July, amassing 4 million views, an unprecedented number for lemon content. Viewers commented on their shock and surprise at Williams' nonreaction to the lemon, writing that they would pucker even at the sight of it. This sparked the challenge. Across TikTok, people bit straight into raw lemons, making their best attempt not to react. Most people found this challenge impossible, but there was a strong respect for the people who did manage to beat the bitter odds. Those who "won" the challenge, such as pioneer Williams, enjoyed more views, likes, and comments than those who failed.

This seemed to be a lucrative content niche for Williams because this was far from her first lemon-related video. Earlier TikToks from 2021 depict Williams indulging in her snack, prepping her lemons, and even eating lemons in a public restaurant with her mother (Rae). Needless to say, people are not usually going around eating raw lemons. But when they do, it is something to congratulate. Eating lemons has become something admirable. If you can brave the #lemonchallenge and prove to the world that you have some special talent or skill, of course, you would like to show that off for some extra views (and maybe some extra cash). Lemons have evolved beyond food to be a testament to the eater's ability. That's something to take note of.

Trazia Rae William's TikTok endeavors unveil the overlooked social potential of the lemon. Just as lemons overtook social media in 2021, my lemons overtook my school cafeteria table in middle school. People are fascinated with lemon-eaters, and I would be lying if I said it didn't make us feel good. Just as Williams continued to post lemon videos for views, I hauled my lunch bag full of lemons to class every day. This was not fruitless labor (no pun intended). We did this to satisfy our basic psychological needs.

Lemons & Health – It Should Be a Done Deal

It may seem like a stretch to associate the consumption of lemons with social validation. After all, there are more obvious reasons why someone may opt for the sour fruit. An academic research study in Mexico found that the most popular reason for lemon consumption was the fruit's health benefits (Cárdenas-Cágal et. al.). Scientific reports on the fruit reveal that citrus foods such as lemons have been found to assist in mitigating symptoms of "obesity, inflammatory diseases, atherosclerosis, neurodegenerative diseases, and cancer" (Saini et. al.). Additionally, lemons contain high concentrations of Vitamin C, which is linked to stronger immune system health (Ramzan et. al.). Lemons have even been linked to lowered COVID-19 infection risk (Alotiby and Al-Harbi). Meanwhile, most marketing surrounding lemons flaunts these healthful traits. Articles on the medicinal use of lemons can be found in numerous reputable Internet sources such as Healthline, WebMD, and MedicalNewsToday (West; WebMD Editorial Contributor; Ware and Warwick). Within Cárdenas-Cágal et. al.'s study, 62% of participants reported eating lemons for the health benefits (Cárdenas-Cágal et. al.)! So, it is not far-fetched to conclude that the health benefits of lemons are general knowledge and that many people seek out lemons for this specific reason.

So, people eat lemons because they're healthy – it may seem like a case closed. Yet, the most critical and unique piece of information provided by Cárdenas-Cágal et. al.'s study is data detailing the emotional impact of lemon consumption. The majority of participants reported feeling

"good, satisfied, and active" after a bitter lemony snack. This *could* explain why people seem to enjoy lemons so much, but something even more curious was revealed by the study. 43% of participants reported that eating lemons satisfied their social needs, 36% reported that lemons satisfied their self-esteem, and 34% reported lemons supported self-fulfillment needs (Cárdenas-Cágal et. al.). Now, what possible connection could eating a lemon have to social satisfaction?

But They're Just Food

You may argue that lemons are not some deep representation of our endless quest for the approval of others (or ourselves) – they're just food. Fair enough. Yet, few foods taste as objectively bad as a lemon. Even if you enjoy the flavor, our biology makes us react adversely to lemons. I mean, even experts are stumped. Researchers Frank et. al. conducted an extensive literature review and trait mapping operation to try to uncover where sour taste began. Many other species like sour tastes because citrus fruits indicate a great source of Vitamin D. Yet, they report that "humans, that enjoy the sour taste triggered by acidic foods are exceptional" (Frank). It simply isn't human to eat lemons, yet people do it anyway. Not to mention, we don't even need them to survive. Many of the health benefits of lemons can be found in other, arguably safer, citrus foods like oranges and grapefruit. This goes to show that the reason we eat lemons isn't truly rooted in our biology. Our body points us away from lemons, however our brains embrace them. Eating lemons perfectly satisfied all our aforementioned sociological needs. We receive external validation from others who are impressed by our ability and compliment us on it. We also receive internal validation because we feel we have an exclusive ability. Lemons may not love our biology, but they sure are infatuated with our psychology.

Even though I just bashed your biology people, there may be some validity to your stance. Who would I be if I didn't admit possible shortcomings? Data suggests that the Capsaicin chili pepper extract that makes up most spices can release endorphins and dopamine when consumed, two neurotransmitters that "can prompt a sense of relief or even a degree of euphoria" (Terry and The Conversation US). It is possible that lemons (or sour foods in general) can elicit a similar biological response that aids our happiness. I can personally attest that eating lemons does bring a type of joy that eating another fruit would not. I also feel that way when I eat Warheads or drink some cherry limeade. While eating other fruits like apples or oranges feels like a health obligation, lemons feel like an indulgence. Further research would be needed, but this does seem like a cool rabbit hole to go down.

Conclusion

Was my younger self considering the greater social implications of my lemon obsession when shoving those empty peels in my friends' faces? Probably not. Yet, there is still much to say about the ways lemons exemplify our craving for validation. A fruit that is bitter, acidic, and unpleasant to eat has become a staple of my culinary experience, and that certainly is not because of my biology. I am far removed from middle school, and honestly, I have not eaten lemons much. I have often felt as though there is no point in me engaging in a raw lemon if no one is around to witness it. I once found this feeling peculiar, but now I understand this is because lemons fueled my social need, not my stomach. Next time I go out to eat, I'll be sure to bring a lemon. Hopefully, it will help me make some new friends.

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