Tastes, Distastes and Disgusts: Young Consumers' Positive and Negative Experiences of Food

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ABSTRACT
A number of authors have explored dislikes, distastes and the associated emotion of disgust, yet there has been little discussion of the development of dislikes and distastes in children. Eight children between the ages of 5 and 10 were given disposable cameras and asked to photograph their likes and dislikes. Following the development of the photographs the children discussed their selections (a third of which featured food products). We explore the photographs and the explanations offered by the children within the context of socialization and develop our analysis around a number of emergent themes.

INTRODUCTION
A limited number of authors have begun to explore dislikes, distastes (e.g. Banister and Hogg 2001; Hogg and Banister 2001; Wilk 1995; 1997) and the associated emotion of disgust (Rozin and Fallon 1987), yet little research has considered the developments of dislikes and distastes in children. This paper focuses on one aspect of a larger study, which aimed to explore children’s socialization and their formation of tastes and distastes. The paper focuses on young consumers’ preferences in the category of food and drink. We report the findings of a qualitative study, which focused on pupils in an infants and junior school in Yorkshire, England. Eight children were given disposable cameras and the task of taking photographs that represented their likes and dislikes. Once the films were developed, the children were interviewed individually about their choice of photographs.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Childhood
Childhood is not simply a biological state of being, but a fluid stage of the social life course. The way in which we view childhood has been subject to change. In one sense Western children are currently seen as vulnerable, innocent and passive, as compared with their past roles as active participants in industrialization, working in factories or mines. The current law and moral discourse fosters common belief systems that harbor children within a sphere of education and protection, encouraging the safe arrival of adulthood. What could be termed a suitable ‘cultural pedagogy’ is translated onto children, suggesting power, yet resistance, stemming from spheres such as schools and the family environment (Steinberg and Kincheloe 1997). Ironically, against this backdrop of protection and assumed passivity is a phenomenon, which people classify and organize symbolic meaning with regard to class. The goods that children consume and the differentiation they achieve through the symbolic properties of products and brands should be understood as ‘socially patterned’ by cultural standards (Lury 2001). This is because distinction is made relationally in comparison to others (Lury 2001) with ‘membership’ and ‘reference groups’ employed as sources of comparison and evaluation (Bearden and Etzel 1982).

Taste: A Form of Classification
The goods that children consume and the differentiation they achieve through the symbolic properties of products and brands should be understood as ‘socially patterned’ by cultural standards (Lury 2001). This is because distinction is made relationally in comparison to others (Lury 2001) with ‘membership’ and ‘reference groups’ employed as sources of comparison and evaluation (Bearden and Etzel 1982).

Bourdieu (1984) views taste as one of the ways in which people classify and organize symbolic meaning with regard to class relations. Tastes can be fashioned in such a way that social positioning within group identities can be swayed negatively or positively by lifestyle choices (Bourdieu 1984). Bourdieu (1984) describes this process of learning through combining past and present experiences as culminating in a ‘habitus’, an organizing system or structure. This habitus becomes internalized and transformed into a way of thinking, which creates significant meaning to the self, within and amongst the group, serving as a pivot by which groups and individuals symbolically display their ‘cultural capital’. In other words, consumption and related behavior is a way in which group hierarchies are regulated by the signs and symbols that are or are not exhibited (Oyersman and Markus 1990).

Tastes will often reflect previous experiences, suggestive of reflexive engagement with memories, triggered through current events. Through taste aversion learning and negative reactions to culprit foods, ill feeling becomes attributed towards the smell or
taste of previously unpleasant experiences (Zimbardo and Weber 1994). New skills and knowledge acquired by children are negotiated through the recognition and splitting of good and bad experiences and attributing those experiences symbolically to products and brands (Klein 1987). Wilk (1997) argues that to learn what can be considered tasteful is basically learning what bad taste is, and in the case of food, what tastes unpleasant.

Christensen (1993) notes how children ‘stare’ at others, making judgments leading to inclusion or exclusion within the spatial location, highlighting how matters of distaste are located within normal appearances and then considered deviant. Research has also suggested that dislikes are easier to articulate than favorite products and this highlights the tendency of consumers to attempt to blend in with their peers (Wilk 1995). The decision not to consume is often achieved through the serious contemplation of what can be considered as ‘not us’ or ‘not we’ (tribal). Therefore, the ‘not me’ aspect of tribal community life equates to a certain embodiment which equates to ‘them’ (Maffesoli 1996).

Rozin and Fallon (1987) provide a discussion of the development of disgust in children and conclude that disgust is not present at birth, but that at some point before reaching five years of age, those negative responses to objects that are disgusting to adults appear. Disgusts and distastes can be distinguished because of the basis for rejection. Disgust is depicted as having an ideational basis for rejection (i.e. offensiveness and contamination), whereas rejection on the basis of distastes is primarily motivated by sensory factors (Rozin and Fallon 1987). The authors suggest three possible motivations for rejection. Firstly, sensory affective (the belief that the object has negative sensory properties –usually a bad taste or a bad odor); secondly the anticipation of harm following ingestion (bodily harm or social harm, perhaps relating to status); and thirdly, rejection based on the basis of ideational motives (knowledge regarding the nature or the origin of the food). These motivations could provide a useful framework for this research (Rozin and Fallon 1987:24).

**Suitable context**

It is an adult focus that constructs a reality whereby products and brands are evaluated in a suitable context for children. Child-specific merchandise is organized in such a way that an acceptable ownership of goods is managed. Children’s products and brands can therefore be seen as signifiers, representative of adult culture, yet organized in such a way that is seen as suitable or perhaps tasteful for childhood culture. Products and brands are recruited in the light of a ‘suitable pedagogy’ (Woodhead 1997). Adults act as gatekeepers, with the status of adulthood signaling authority and controlling access to many products (and their entry into the home). What is seen as fit, or unfit for the ears, eyes and minds of children stems from an adult culture, and yet this is open to evaluation and scrutiny from children, and the childhood culture in which they dwell. At times there will be a clash of cultures, and aspects of power and resistance will be reorganized to find a middle ground of acceptable or unacceptable tastes (Foucault 1977; Wilk 1995; Wouters 1986).

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study aimed to explore children’s positive and negative experiences of food and the influences on these interpretations. A rural village school in Yorkshire, United Kingdom, was chosen as a suitable location to investigate the overall research concerns. The village has witnessed steady development since the closure of mines in the 1980’s and features high rates of geographical mobility yet with a prominent presence of long-term traditional dwellers. The development of this community has resulted in an array of social actors from varying backgrounds and their children attend the village school.

The research reported here represents one aspect of a larger study. Eight children aged between 5 and 10 were given single-use cameras over a two-week vacation period. They were asked to take photographs of items that they liked and disliked. The children were given an open brief and took photographs of a wide-ranging subject matter, including toys, clothing, houses, scenery, family members and flowers. For the purposes of this paper we focus on food items, which provided a popular choice of subject matter.

Photography has been used in a number of studies and provides a means to provoke an emotional and expressive response (e.g. Belk et al 1982; Morrow 1998; Schratz and Steiner-Loffler 1998). Photographs can help to locate items in time and space (Emmison and Smith 2000) and provide images, which the photographer (the children) could then talk about at length. As McCauley (1997:63) says “all photographs are representations, in that they tell us as much about the photographer, the technology used to produce the image, and their intended uses as they tell us about the events or things they depicted”. Photography has been successfully incorporated into previous studies that focus on children (e.g. Schratz and Steiner-Loffler 1998) and can provide useful visual prompts during the interview process (Morrow 1998).

The analysis of these photographs was also child-centered. Once the films were developed, one of the researchers quickly glanced through them before the interviews. However, to all intents and purposes, when the child who had taken the photographs opened the envelope containing the photographs, no prior analysis had been conducted. The child then spoke freely about why he or she had chosen to take the photographs, placing them on one of two boards, one of which represented those photographs featuring likes, and one featuring those that were disliked. The interviewer used prompts where necessary, but as much as possible the child talked about his or her photographs as independently as possible. Following this stage, the two researchers reviewed the transcript from the interview, looking for meanings in addition to those voiced by the participant. The process was therefore one of self-analysis (by the child), supplemented by the interpretation and the discussion between the researchers.

As with all research focusing on children, it was important that ethical guidelines were observed. We received written permission from the parents of all the children participating in the study. Participation was voluntary and was in full knowledge of the teachers and the head teacher of the school. The children who participated in the research were not offered any reward for their participation; they were allowed to withdraw at any time from the study; and could withdraw photographs from the study if they wanted to do so.

**Findings**

The use of photography provided a successful means by which to involve the children in a task, providing insight into their lives, their likes and their dislikes. The children were given a free rein to take photographs of anything they wanted, although the initial invitation gave the suggestions of food, shoes, clothes, places, shops, packets, bags, drinks, smells, trainers, toys, pictures and sweets. Children took photographs of a wide variety of subjects, with a mixed amount of success! However, it is worth noting how seriously the children took the task. They seemed to have carefully considered how to use their limited (i.e. 24 exposures) opportunity to convey their tastes in as much detail as possible.

For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on just one category of photographs, the most popular subject matter, food. A number of emergent themes (Miles and Huberman 1994) will be
discussed, with the aim of reaching a greater understanding of children’s reasons for disliking certain food products and liking others. These themes are natural vs. processed / healthy vs. unhealthy, adult foods vs. child foods, oral taste vs. other senses and symbolic associations and experiences.

One of the important characteristics of food and drink is the way in which it physically becomes part of the self. This provides an important distinction from some of the other subjects featured in the photographs (such as clothing and toys), although some links could be made between physical tastes (foods) and smells, with some objects featured in photographs because of the offensive smell associated with them (e.g. rubbish bins and dog faeces).

As can be seen by Table 1, food was more likely to feature in children’s photographs as disliked items. However, overall the photographs depicted approximately equal numbers of positive and negative photographs. This suggested that during the photography exercise children looked to food products when considering items they disliked, or it could be that they found disliked food products more easily available (i.e. in the home).

The categories of foods selected are informative, providing us with a sense of the types of foods that were liked and disliked by these children. From these categories and the detailed responses of the children, we drew upon a number of themes, which helped to make more explicit the reasoning behind the selections. Although the photographs are not included within this paper they will form an important part of the presentation.

**Natural vs. Packaged /Processed–Healthy vs. unhealthy**

The distinction between natural foods and packaged/processed foods was immediately clear. In general, natural foods seemed more susceptible to negative interpretation by the children than those that were packaged and manufactured. The distinction between packaged and processed foods tended to coincide with those that could be interpreted as healthy or unhealthy, with children often rejecting or demonstrating distaste towards foods that were widely considered to be ‘good for you’.

Products commonly regarded as important staples in the British diet such as rice, pasta and bread were not often included by the children in their photographs, perhaps because many children regarded them in neither a positive or a negative light. It is likely these were items that were just accepted as part of a ‘normal’ diet, rather than inspiring particularly positive or negative feelings. However, there were a few children who voiced their dislikes of such products:

*Kate (age 7): “Rice, I don’t like any kind of rice...”*

Health organizations frequently warn about the dangers of a high salt, high fat, high sugar diet, yet many of the photographs featuring children’s tastes focused on products widely considered to be unhealthy. In contrast, the disliked photographs featured a number of foods, which are considered to offer more nutritional value to the children. Children seemed to favor those foods that were either sweet or featured a high fat content. In fact the ‘snacks’ category and the ‘sweets and chocolate’ category stood out as ones in which children included more positive than negative images.

The photographs provided an indication of the success of company marketing strategies, with the children selecting products that were clearly targeted towards them (providing links with the themes of adults’ vs. children’s foods). Tinned foods did not feature very often in the children’s photographs, but it is perhaps worth noting that the two tinned items interpreted positively (out of the 4 photographed) were both baked beans with sausages, items that are primarily associated with children.

*Kate (age 7): “Baked beans and sausages, they’re nice”*

Perhaps predictably, the children’s photographs featured a large variety of sweets and chocolates. The number of sweet items photographed could be partly attributable to the time of year, which coincided with the children’s Easter break from school. The festivities may have increased the children’s access to chocolates and ‘treat’ products, and three of the eight children included photographs of Easter eggs. In general sweets and chocolates were interpreted positively by the children, in fact there was only one product in this category which was included because it was disliked, and this was the ‘Manchester Tart’ which is a traditional British cake, primarily popular with (older) adults.

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group/category</th>
<th>No. items mentioned</th>
<th>No. items positive</th>
<th>No. items negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rice/pasta/bread/‘healthy’ cereals</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snack foods</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh meat / fish</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit and vegetables</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dairy products</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processed / tinned foods</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chocolate / sweets</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home cooking</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sauces / accompaniments</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>71</strong></td>
<td><strong>31</strong></td>
<td><strong>40</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The children often found it difficult to express why they liked or didn’t like particular food items. The vocabulary and ability to describe the subtleties of oral taste is perhaps too advanced for many of these children. Likes would often be expressed with the use of sounds, such as “Ooooh...” [e.g. Easter eggs]. One of the girls in the study attempted to describe her dislike for onions. She found it quite straightforward to describe the physical reaction that they produced (i.e. the tears) but she found it very difficult to explain what it was about their actual taste that she did not welcome, initially attributing her dislike to their ‘sweet’ taste.

Kate (age 7): “they make me cry and they are too sweet, too much sugar in, I do like to eat things but nothing too sweet”
Researcher: “Can you think of a reason why you don’t like the tastes?”
Kate: “They taste like they have got this…. They taste to me as if they have this little thingy in which makes them taste horrible but I don’t know what it is…. that makes me feel sick...”

This in itself demonstrates the difficulties of exploring tastes and distastes with children. Although children may have clearly defined likes and dislikes, it is difficult to ascertain where these views stem from. In the following interchange, the language used by the participant would seem to reflect a consideration for the social meanings associated with food—because of the use of the word ‘cool’—but it seems more likely that the word ‘cool’ was selected as a ‘catch all’ term, because of the difficulties associated with describing specific tastes.

Isla (age 7) “These are crisps I don’t like, they’re plain”
Researcher “Do you like other crisps?”
Isla “Yes, but I don’t think these crisps are cool”

In addition many participants found it difficult to pinpoint what they liked about foods.

Lucy (age 9) “Look, I like tuna twist and I like roast potatoes”
Researcher “Do you, why?...”
Lucy “They feel nice in my tummy”

Adult foods vs. child foods

Findings from a previous study indicated that children are very aware of the importance of consuming those products and clothing, which are deemed ‘appropriate’ for their age (see Banister and Booth 2003), a concern that was also noted with the young adult participants in another study (Banister and Hogg 2001). This same kind of anxiety was noted here, although to a lesser extent. Many of the food products featured are clearly those which the children’s parents favor, and which the children found more difficult to understand. Examples of such products were items such as coffee, sauces and meal accompaniments (e.g. pickles, salad cream).

The children were also at an age when certain products might be considered distasteful because of their association with a younger age group. For example one of the participants described baby food as ‘sloppy’. Yet other products remained liked, precisely because they could be associated with the participant at a younger age (nostalgia).

Isla (age 7): “I like strawberries… I learned them when I was a baby”

The research also allowed the opportunity to consider how the children interpreted those products that were directly targeted at them. Some of these featured as liked products.

Peter (age 5): “These are my little brother’s [Easter eggs].... I like Bob the Builder
Researcher: “Why do you like it?”
Peter “Yes, I’ve got Pilchard he is a character, he’s a cat on Bob the Builder”

Ironically, aspects of marketing that might be assumed to ingratiate products to children could sometimes have the reverse effect.

Peter (age 5) “…I don’t like Sugar Puffs because the honey monster is on the video [advertisement]”

Symbolic associations and experiences

Like many consumption experiences, food products were not without symbolic meanings. Associations and previous experiences were frequently evoked by the photographs and provided explanations regarding why the food item was liked or disliked, suggesting links with Rozin and Fallon (1987).

Kate (age 7): “I don’t like curry.... It reminds me of being sick and it makes me feel sick”
Researcher: “Can you remember the first time it made you feel sick?”
Kate “It made me sick and daddy shouts at me and he still gives it me and he says if I don’t eat it I can’t have anything else and I don’t like it”
Researcher “Is that why you don’t like things because it reminds you?”
Kate “Of being told off”

Two types of (negative) associations were made here. Firstly the curry was found distasteful because it had made the child sick, and secondly it reminded her of another unpleasant experience—being told off by her father—which made her rejection all the more concrete. There were actually a number of instances where the children made reference to foods that had made them feel sick in the past, and by association the items remained offensive to them.

Isaac (age 8) “...when I used to like strawberries my daddy bought some and then I ate all of them and then I felt sick”

One of the participants considered mint flavors—even in foods that he generally liked, such as chocolate or ice cream—to be negative because it reminded him of toothpaste, or more specifically, cleaning his teeth, an activity he did not enjoy.

Isaac (age 8) “I bet you’re wondering what this [ice cream and chocolate] is... it is mint, but you have got to put this on the bad board.... It’s my toothbrush, I hate brushing my teeth. I think it is a waste of time”

Another reoccurring theme was the way in which the appearance of food could be altered and made less appealing, much like Rozin and Fallon’s (1987) allusion to personal contamination in food. A number of participants described how others (generally siblings) would change the appearance of food, and how this affected their perceptions of products.
Throughout this study, the children made reference to items that were associated with their home life. Sometimes photographs (both positive and negative) depicted family members (especially siblings) or pictures of the home and garden. At other times the associations were less direct. Home-cooked meals fitted in with this less direct association in the sense that it reminded children of family meals—time spent together as a family. In every case that home cooking was featured in the photographs (by 4 different participants) these photographs represented positive images for the children.

Kate (age 7) “I like this macaroni cheese with tomato ketchup, my mummy does this”

Lucy (age 9) “I don’t like the taste and feel [of bananas]...my sister does horrible things with them in her mouth...she does it with pasta too...and cheesy Wotsits....”

‘Taste’ vs. other senses

It was interesting to recognize that although food is primarily associated with the sense of taste, other senses were important in the way in which the participants interpreted the food. A number of photographs were taken of things that were interpreted as dirty or smelly (e.g. dirty plates). Eggs were mentioned by a couple of the participants as foods that would be rejected because of their smell. Certain foods were consistently featured in a negative light; examples were rotten fruit and bananas, which were seen by many to be particularly disgusting. In fact the way in which certain foods changed from being inviting and positively viewed products, to ones that were viewed negatively, could explain some of the strongly held dislikes for fruits and vegetables.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The method used in this study was particularly successful in encouraging children to talk about their own experiences of consumption, and can be considered a child-centered methodology. However, it was often difficult for children to verbalize their thinking behind the photographs. This partly reflected the age of the children. Between the ages of 5 and 10 children’s vocabulary is perhaps not sufficiently developed to fully elaborate something as complicated as taste—something that many adults choose to be educated to achieve, as is the case with wine tasting.

However, the photographs were very effective in exploring the associations that children made with certain foods and how these affected their interpretation of these foods. Throughout the photography exercise, children talked enthusiastically about their day-to-day likes and dislikes, and food was an interesting category on which to focus, because of its everyday nature. Through exploring children’s attitudes to different foods, we learnt a great deal about children’s relationships with others, the influence of age, marketing and experience on children’s interpretation of products and the world around them.

The findings provided support for the work of Rozin and Fallon (1987) who identified four types of rejection (distaste, danger, inappropriateness and disgust) in relation to food. In the context of this study, distaste was the most difficult source of rejection for the children to articulate, much more so than when their dislikes reflected previous experiences, or rejection on ideational grounds (e.g. adult foods or ‘not cool’ or for babies). Some of the foods could be interpreted by children as representing danger in the sense of reliving past experience—for example eating food that had made them sick in the past (even if they had originally liked that food). The photographs provided the ideal means for children to identify the properties that they found offensive or disgusting about certain foods, sometimes linking food consumption with past experiences (being sick) or the future appearance of the food (e.g. rotting fruit). The children frequently used facial expressions to illustrate their arguments, screwing up their face to illustrate their distastes or disgust for certain products, which again suggests that visual methodologies were an appropriate method for this study, rather than relying on the ability of children to articulate their preferences.

LIMITATIONS

The study was not without its limitations. There were many benefits associated with using a method that encouraged enjoyment and creativity by the children. However, the data collection relied on the fact that children would be able to use the cameras, and some photographs were rendered useless for the study. In addition as images have several sites of meaning construction, someone else may have been provided with different photographs or with a different explanation for their inclusion. At times the children’s explanation of why they had decided to take certain photographs was incomplete and difficult to follow, but this is a difficulty associated with all research that focuses on children. In essence this study was exploratory in nature, seeking to inform and generate interest rather than lead to conclusive results.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should explore how children’s tastes develop. Particularly with food products it would be interesting to chart how foods normally associated with mature tastes gradually become acceptable to children, and explore how different parenting attitudes (to children’s food consumption) might affect the development of tastes (and distastes). It was interesting to note how fresh and natural foods seemed more susceptible to distastes. It is suggested that it is not always the taste of a natural product that puts children off, but the way in which the product changes with time. Bananas, although featured by one child as a liked product, were more often featured as disliked products, because of the way in which the consistency of the fruit changes when it turns from ripe to over ripe and past its best. In the interests of public policy and the promotion of sufficient fruit and vegetable intake by children, this observation needs to be studied more clearly. It would also be useful to expand the research focus to include a greater number of children from a variety of backgrounds, as this would expand the number of discoveries and conceptualization.

REFERENCES


