The Everyday Practices Surrounding Young Peoples’ Food Consumption

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This research explores the everyday food consumption practices that young people adopt in response to mealtime interdependencies at home and at school, and the meanings embedded in these practices. The study uses an interpretive research strategy and adopts a multi-method approach. A key theme that is emerging in relation to the meanings created with food consumption is the relationship between formal and informal environments for food consumption and between parental and teacher control, and how these are mediated by marketing phenomena. In response to mealtime interdependencies, informants adopt rebellious and informal everyday mealtime practices such as ‘play-eating’, ‘eating-in-front-of-the-telly’, ‘eating-making-a-mess’, ‘eating-at-any-time’, and ‘speed-eating’. The emergent practices may be interpreted as a form of intergenerational conflict communicated through consumption acts.

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This research explores the everyday food consumption practices that young people adopt in response to mealtime interdependencies at home and at school, and the meanings embedded in these practices. The nuanced meanings of food consumption have been somewhat overlooked in consumer research. The majority of extant studies in this area concentrate on experimental or survey-based approaches to look at regional, ethnic or class-based food attitudes (i.e., Verbeke and Lopez, 2005; Tomlinson, 1994), or speciality markets such as organic food consumption (Squires, Juric and Cornwall, 2001), with a view to discovering potential new market segments. A few studies in the Consumer Culture Theory tradition have explored more deeply the symbolism of eating in relation to: the food culture of particular societies or ethnic groups (Ahmad, 1998; Hetzel, 1999); consumer micro-cultures (Thompson and Troester, 2002); and specific consumption events (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991). However, apart from Hirschman et al. (2004), there has been little research that examines the differing contexts of eating, especially among young people, and how these affect the meanings attached to food consumption.

Given the ever-increasing trends towards obesity in the developed world (Barnwell et al., 2005; Farah and Buzby, 2005), it seems especially important to gain insights into such practices. Research that places more emphasis on phenomenological meanings in contemporary food consumption practices can lead to a better understanding of intergenerational conflicts over mealtime practices, and help unpick the symbolic dynamics that emerge between parents and children; and between children and teachers in institutions of social control (the family and the school).

In light of the structural, sociological transformation of key social institutions such as the family and schools, it seems appropriate to explore the way social relationships, and interdependencies between parents, teachers and young people are re-negotiated over contemporary everyday food consumption practices, especially at mealtimes. The transformation in social institutions also means that social relationships have to be renegotiated because young people (people in particular) have been liberated from traditional roles and constraints, and individuals are removed from status based classes (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). We are interested to discover whether the same long-term changes in the structure of societies which Norbert Elias argues in his book, The Civilising Process (1939), brought about changes in manners, in the expression of emotions, and in personality structure (Mennell, 1985), are reflected in the patterning of the everyday practices surrounding young people’s food consumption. This still remains an area requiring further investigation.

Whilst anthropologists and sociologists have shown that food consumption that takes place through the family meal, is a core activity in family life (Douglas, 1972; Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; Murcott, 1983, 1997; Charles and Kerr, 1988; De Vault 1991; Warde, 1997), and in particular a meeting point in everyday life (Lupton, 1996), an analysis of the practices through which children and their parents consume is largely absent. So, too, the part played by consumers as individuals and as members of interrelated social groups appears to have been missed in empirical and theoretical accounts of children’s consumption (Martens et al, 2004; Martens, 2005).

Participants to the meal occasion ‘eat and drink together’, and ‘are by this very act tied to one another by a bond of friendship and mutual obligation’ (Smith, 1889:247 in Mennell et al, 1992:115). If at mealtimes, young people, parents and teachers are ‘bound together through interdependence with each other, they have power over each other- sometimes very unequal and one-sided, sometimes rather evenly balanced, usually fluctuating to some extent, and often changing in a definite direction over time’ (Mennell, 1985: 16). The very fact that young people, parents and teachers are interdependent with each other implies that they exert forces over each other, forces which shape not just their overt behaviour but their tastes and the way they think about themselves and their activities (cf.Mennell, 1985: 16).

Given this background, we explore the dynamics in parent-child and teacher child relationship, as reflected through the everyday practices surrounding young people’s food consumption. What are the everyday food consumption practices that young people adopt in response to mealtime interdependencies at home and at school, what meanings are embedded in these practices, and how are these interdependencies mediated by marketing phenomena?
This study uses an interpretive research strategy. Stage 1 of the research was school-based and gathered data from school children aged between 13 and 17 through observation, semi-structured and in-depth interviews as well as visual diaries. Stage 2 was an observation during family mealtimes; we talked informally with family members. The research followed a theoretical sampling approach for recruiting informants, i.e. a sample that typifies the population, the theoretical category or the phenomenon to be studied and was chosen purposefully with consideration to representativeness (Mason, 2002; Silverman, 2000). In addition, online research was used to sensitise the researchers to the culturally resonant categories (Hirschman et al., 2004). In total the dataset so far consists of 13 personal interviews, 9 online interviews, 23 visual diaries, mealtime observations with 3 families, and 42 days of school-based observations. The data analysis is following the principles for the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data as recommended by Spiggle (1994) and others (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994), and continuing in an iterative fashion across offline and online environments.

A key theme that is emerging at meal times in relation to the meanings created with food consumption is the relationship between formal and informal environments (Warde and Martens, 2000) for food consumption and between parental and teacher control, and how these are mediated by marketing phenomena. Informants described a life world which they energised by the goals of individualism. In response to mealtime interdependencies at home and at school, informants adopt practices such as ‘play-eating’, ‘eating-in-front-of-the-telly’, ‘eating-making-a-mess’, ‘eating-at-any-time’ and ‘speed-eating’. Evident from our field notes, is the successful and collective orchestration of these practices through trickery, mischief, cheating, deception and non-conformity (Willis, 2001). The emergent practices were shared by most informants, regardless of their social or economic status. This is contrary to dominant perspectives in consumer research that centers on the premise that taste classifies and classifies the classifier (Bourdieu, 1984-6), and that consumption is indicative of social categories (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979).

Drawing on our fieldwork, we argue that the emergent practices are not only indicative of intergenerational conflict over food consumption practices and values. Other considerations include, (1) the re-creation of community amongst young people in a world where parents reportedly find work more rewarding than family life (Hochschild, 1997); (2) a search for a relationship of equality rather than one which is asymmetrical and based on authority and inequality; (3) a rebellion by young people against social control exerted by parents and teachers; (4) a form of escape from traditional roles inscribed in the family and the school in search of freedom and independence; (5) a challenge posed by young people to values of traditionalism that some parents and teachers might seek to uphold; (6) an expression of individuality and search for self-identity; and (7) an ongoing opposition to dominant lifestyle norms and formal food consumption practices such as eating round the table and obeying traditional meal-time rituals.

References
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