Changing Mealtime Rituals: the Mediating Influence of the Television on Family Dynamics

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This research uses an interpretive research strategy and adopts a multi-method approach to explore the mediating influence of the television on family dynamics. A key theme that has emerged in relation to the meanings created around food consumption is the relationship between formal and informal environments, and how this relationship is mediated by the television in maintaining a shared family identity. We interpret this everyday mealtime conduct as not only indicative of the changing mealtime rituals, but also as an expression of intergenerational conflict over consumption values. The study contributes to our comprehension of how family identity is constructed around material objects, not purely because of their market values, but as a result of their post-purchase significance in the everyday life of consumers.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Eating at home has always been regarded as a time when all family members come together from their diverse and separate activities to affirm their relatedness and love (Levy 1996). Yet traditional mealtimes have become more fragmented with members of a family often eating at different times to suit their own personal schedules (Warde 1997). Although food meanings, and the rituals and practices in which these are embedded, contribute to family identity and domestic life (Charles and Kerr 1988), our knowledge is still limited as to how these are changing, and how material objects, such as the television or computer games, are influencing these changes.

Whilst the family serves as a consuming, producing, distributing and socialising unit interacting with other elements of society (Price and Epp 2005), consumer researchers have devoted relatively little attention in understanding them. Extant research has investigated food consumption behaviour with particular focus on specific consumption events such as Thanksgiving Day (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991); Christmas (Hirschman and LaBarbera 1989); public eating venues (Fischer and Wayne 1999); food culture of particular societies or ethnic groups (Hettzel 1999); and consumer micro-cultures (Thompson and Troester 2002). Yet, apart from Hirschman et al. (2004), there has been a paucity of consumer research that examines the differing contexts of eating, and how these affect the meanings attached to food consumption. Importantly, in relation to this study, there is silence about the actual practices in regard to eating together as families (Murcott 1997).

Given this background, our present purpose is to explore how the television is mediating family mealtime relationships, and their concomitant rituals. In particular, we are interested in naturalistic everyday food consumption practices in the domestic context of consumption, rather than specific consumption events or food consumption in public places.

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, and mealtime observations with 3 families. 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.

Two overarching conceptual categories are used to organise our interpretation of the meanings of mealtime rituals, and how these are mediated by the television: (1) the formal environment for food consumptions; and, (2) the informal environment for food consumption. Our findings show that when eating in a formal environment, such as the dining room, the table is usually set in a specific way, making it easier to maintain a routinised seating order, which may also be hierarchical, for example, with a father or mother at the head of the table. This formal configuration facilitates interactions between family members which take place on a face-to-face basis, with few external distractions. Appropriate eating and serving utensils (e.g., knives, forks, plates, dishes etc) will also be used. By contrast, the informal environment (usually a lounge or ‘den’) tends to be dominated by the television, with seating arrangements organised accordingly in order to ensure good viewing. In this environment it is not always convenient to use traditional eating or serving utensils and it thus encourages a more relaxed style of consumption. The seating of family members often follows a random pattern, depending on who comes first into the room, and an available seat’s proximity to the television. Because everyone faces the television rather than each other, conventional mealtime interactions may prove difficult, not least because family members will usually be absorbed in what is happening on the television.

Drawing from these findings, we argue that, family identity may be enacted through everyday mealtime interactions and the various communication processes therein that include parents, children, television, the Internet and so forth. Of particular importance in our findings, is the link between food, family identity and domestic life, and how this is mediated by the television in several ways. Our study demonstrates how the mealtime reality of everyday life is frequently shared with the television. We argue that the television is becoming part of the nucleus family. Just as people share not only food, but also conversation and a social life, so too, does the television become part of that social life when informants’ conversations are centred on television programmes, rather than on other family members.

REFERENCES


