Family Quality Time and the Techno-Culture Food Environment

Pepukayi Chitakunye, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
Amandeep Takhar, University of Bedfordshire, United Kingdom

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the techno-culture food environment is transforming family quality time within the domestic context of food consumption. The findings from our semi-ethnographic study reveal that family members interact with different media devices at mealtimes. Within this context, we argue that family quality time is changed and altered in form, but not ultimately abandoned.

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Pepukayi Chitakunye, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
More than ever, new technologies are demonstrating their potential for transforming society. Although we know much about consumption of technology (Vandewater and Lee 2009; Kozinets 2008; Sorenson 2006), interplay between technology and family quality time still needs further investigation. Within the social sciences, attention to family time has been more attuned to differences across men and women in terms of time spent at work (Fiese, Foley and Spagnola 2006), lack of family time driven by consumption desires (Mestdag and Vandeweyer 2005), how mothers and fathers balance work and home responsibilities (DeVault 2000; Hochschild 1997), and the role of homemade food in the construction of family identity (Moisio, Arnould and Price, 2004). Despite the noteworthy contributions of these studies, we have virtually no understanding of how family quality time is changed and altered in form particularly when media devices such as iPhones, iPads, and cell phones encroach on the mealtime context.

Whilst prior research explores the role of technology in consumer lives (Kozinets 2008; Ventantesh 2006; Jackson 2002; Mick and Fournier 1998), there is silence on how technology impacts on parent-child mealtime interactions, and family routines. What we need to understand is whether the purpose and meaning of quality time changes when new technologies become an inseparable part of family mealtimes. Gutierrez, Price and Arnould (2008: 189) observe that time spent over family dinner, is positively correlated with benefits such as reduced childhood obesity, aiding literacy development and reduced speech impairments, language socialization, lower levels of behavioral problems, higher academic achievement and reduced drug and alcohol use among teens. And yet, media devices such as iPods, iPads, smart phones, encroach on daily family life and transform the meanings of time spent over family dinner. Further, technology, in the form of TV programs and their characters can become an obsession with which viewers constantly interact and around which they model their lives (Chitakunye and Maclaran 2012; Russell, Norman and Heckler 2004; Russell and Puto 1999; O’Guinn and Shrun 1997). Although these new technologies continue to mediate family relationships and are progressively more embedded in everyday practices, our knowledge is still limited as to how these are changing the form and meaning of family quality time.

Given this background, the purpose of this study is to explore how the techno culture environment is transforming family quality time in the domestic context of food consumption. In particular, we are interested in children’s naturalistic practices when they come into contact with media devices at mealtimes. Unlike previous research, this study takes everyday mealtime practices as the unit of investigation.

This study uses an interpretive research strategy. Informants were children aged between 13 and 17 who provided insights through visual diaries that generated 360 photographs, and 13 in-depth interviews, which was supplemented by immersing ourselves in four families on five different occasions. These constant repetitive visits to the families, over a period of two years, were vital in deepening our experience of action, conversations and the mealtime context. Prior to, during, and subsequent to our immersion into mealtimes, we kept detailed written fieldnotes.

Consistent with previous research, we find that technology transforms family relations in different ways (Venkatesh, StolzKoff, Shih, and Mazumdar 2001; Mick and Fournier 1998). In line with previous research, our findings also show how, in some families, the essence of quality time has been reorganised around specific television programmes. For example, the X-factor, East Enders, and Coronation Street, were popular programmes around which families commuted. However, this presented a paradox that resulted to assimilation and isolation effects (Mick and Fournier 1998), particularly in families with conflicting viewing interests.

Prevalent across the families visited, we observed an array of multitasking practices at mealtimes, not only with the television, but with other with media devices such as iPods, iPads, smart phones, cell phones, and laptops. Similarly, photographs generated by the children reveal the continued presence of these media devices at the dinner table, indicating a willingness to use them whilst eating. Although it is becoming increasingly rare that families eat together, at times, family members stay connected through interplay with technology. For example, in Hayley’s household (female, 16), the father worked away from home, and through media devices, he stayed connected to family members at different times, including mealtimes. In this sense, mediated communications during family dinner are sometimes with family members who are not present, and not just friends, and other non-family members. Within this context, we argue that interplay with technology contribute to the construction of both family and individual identity.

In some families, children felt that media devices were intertwined with family interactional processes. On the contrary, some parents saw these media devices as disruptive to family togetherness. However, examples from our study include some parents using these media devices at the dinner table. For example, during one mealtime observation, a mother could be seen using the cordless phone more frequently than the children. In another family, the father always took the cordless phone to the dinner table. Agreeing with Mick and Fournier (1998), we found that technology presents a paradox that leads to both assimilation and isolation effects. Within this context, we align assimilation effects with the construction of a collective family identity, and isolation effects with the construction of individual identity. For example, when the children were connected to the outside world, parents felt more isolated, and vice versa. Here, it emerged that different communication technologies are preferred by family members. In one family, the children preferred to use their smartphones whilst the parents preferred to use the cordless phone. When the cell phone or cordless phones were answered, at times, the family members would leave the table, and continued talking whilst in another part of the house. This behaviour reduced family quality time.

One contribution of this study is that it shifts the focus of the interplay between family quality time and technology from the television and its contents (Chitakunye and Maclaran 2012; Russell et al 2004; Schau and Muniz 2004; O’Guinn and Shrun 1997) and instead considers the construction of collective and individual identities within a mix of mealtime multitasking practices, in particular, in relation to media devices that encroach on the mealtime context. These devices include iPhones, iPads, cordless phones, laptops; cell phones and other related devices. Within this context, we argue that, family quality time is changed and altered in form, but not ultimately abandoned.
REFERENCES