Making Meal Times Fun: Representation of Mothers and Family Meals Over Time in Magazine Advertising

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This paper examines discursive meanings around the (re)presentation of meals and the role of mothers in ‘producing’ happiness and fun in the family. Advertising over a sixty years in two popular women’s magazines in the UK and Australia are used to identify changing family eating and related mothering emotion work.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017294/volumes/v42/NA-42

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Women, Emotion Work and Producing ‘Family’: The Role of Food and Fun
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Paper #1: Love should be fun: Mothering as a practice
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Paper #2: Making meal times fun: representation of mothers and family meals over time in Magazine Advertising
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Paper #3: Feeding the children at school: unpacking fun food in packed lunches
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Paper #4: A Prize in Every Box! From Cracker Jack to Fun da Middles
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SESSION OVERVIEW
Bourdieu refers to family as a ‘social artefact’ (1996: p.25). ‘To understand how the family turns from nominal fiction into a real group whose members are united by intense affective bonds, one has to take account of all the practical and symbolic work that transforms the obligation to love…This work falls more particularly to the women.. perpetrated through a continuous creation of family feeling.’ (1996:p.22)

This special session focuses on the ‘emotion work’ of women in ‘producing fun’ through their food care practices. DeVault (1999) dissects their complex organisation, negotiation and planning and reveals women’s efforts as creative and persistent. Much of this effort centres on creative use of food to materialize the idyllic ‘happy’ nuclear family. Cook (2011) suggests that mothers consume for the family; we focus on the ‘producer mother’ who consumes to produce the family. She is the emotion manager, who uses tools of cleaning, cooking, and creating to keep the family smiling. This production of family fun and joy is not always a easy process, but often presented as effortless in popular media (Ticknell 2005). This session examines women’s constant effort, attention and ‘emotion maintenance’ work through food, materializing emotions that reinforce the idea of family.

We situate our session in the context of the family as a site of discourse and practice. Within this field, we study how the gendered practices of feeding as affective work integral to producing the family. We build on the work of scholars such as Murcott (1983), DeVault (1991), Sheridan (2002), Martens and Scott (2005), Chambers (2001), and Jackson (2010, 2011); examining how the emotion work of fun and joy in everyday food are used to materialize the emotional links of a ‘ideal family’.

This session examines emotion work by which ‘Family’ is constructed. It brings together four papers (four countries) that examine how women materialize family emotions of fun and ‘caring’ through novelty around food and mealtimes.

The first paper uses ethnographic work in the Scandinavian context. It examines how mothering can be conceptualized as a practice requiring consumption. It highlights how emotions such as love and fun and its consumption must be understood as a relationship between mother and needing child.

The second paper is a visual analysis of representation of family care in women’s magazines (UK and Australia) and highlights the role of women in using food and mealtimes to ‘produce’ happy families. The paper contextualizes media discourses and implicates advertising as a cultural intermediary that reproduces a mythic ‘happy family’.

In the third paper mothers (in the UK) reconcile conflicting discourses and pressures around ‘fun’ foods to produce carefully negotiated ‘lunch boxes’ which keep both child and school happy. It details the effort and labour that goes into balancing of ‘healthy’ with ‘fun’.

The fourth paper (from Canada) focuses on how the market helps create and sanction ideas of ‘food as fun’. From traditional ideas of food as something to be taken seriously, this paper examines the evolution of the relationship between food and fun.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION
Is Food work really fun? for whom? Is it a necessary affective state for families? Is it overrated?

How has the relation fun-food- family been constructed in the marketplace? What are the implications of this relation for family collective and individual identities (i.e mothers)?

Love should be fun: Mothering as a practice

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Consumption can be seen as a way to construct and express identity (Arnould and Thompson 2005), including that as a mother. Encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings, and material goods, the marketplace provides the consumer with a broad range of symbolic meanings which she may tap into when constructing this identity (e.g. Hogg et al. 2011; Scott 2006). One way to conceptualize the relation between consumption and the identity as a mother supports the idea of role embracing (Davies et al. 2010; Hogg et al. 2004; Jennings and O’Malley 2003). Another body of literature stresses the discourses that women use to present themselves and act as mothers (Bugge and Almås 2006; Lupton 1996; Moisio et al. 2004). Identity can also be seen as an intersection of practices (Reckwitz, 2002:256) serving as the bedrock of consumption (Warde 2005:144). Even if approaching mothering as a practice is far from new in the social sciences in general (cf. Chandler 1998; O’Reilly 2009; Rich 1986; Ruddick 1995[1989]), it is still fairly unexplored in consumer research. By conceptualizing mothering as one of the practices that may constitute identity and that requires consumption to be performed (Warde 2005), this paper explores different ways in which mothering expresses love towards a needing child with the help of consumption – practice performances many times facilitated by bringing in the fun.

The paper conceptualizes mothering as a learned practice along the lines of feminist philosopher Ruddick’s maternal thinking (1995[1989]) whose philosophy also goes hand-in-hand with Schatzki’s notion of practices (1996: 2002). Mothering as a practice spotlights emotions and underlines that mothering must be understood as an emotional relationship that develops between a caregiving practitioner and a needing child (Ruddick 1995[1989]). The relationship does not necessarily involve the child’s biological mother or father...
but can be anyone prepared to step into it, while striving for overall purposes like preserving, fostering, and making the child socially acceptable (ibid.). The practitioners find these purposes worth striving for through their attentive love which keeps the practice going – a capacity that allows them to see the world from the child’s perspective and care intensely about it (ibid.).

The study of love and other types of emotions has long been dealt with in sociocultural consumption research (cf. Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Coon 2013; Belk et al. 2003; Campbell 1987; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Miller 1998). What has been lacking according to some scholars, however, are analytical frameworks that make emotions more visible in consumption (Illouz 2009; Beruchashvili and Moisio 2013) - and this is where a practice theoretical approach can help. According to practice theory, we engage in practices and strive towards certain ends because they matter to us, and the emotions related to these strivings are expressed through the activities composing a practice and understood only within the practice (Schatzki 1997:302). Inspired by Nussbaum (2001) attentive love can be seen as a background emotion guiding and making the practice matter, while situational emotions like joy or frustration express how the practice is going (Schatzki 1996). By approaching the relation between consumption and theories of practice along the lines of Warde’s seminal work (2005), the purpose of this paper is to illustrate how mothering can be understood as an emotional practice and how the consumption and the fun that occurs in relation to it can be understood as something that this practice entails and requires. In order to pin down both the doings and sayings composing a practice, I have used an ethnographic study, including participant observations, informal conversations and attention to material artifacts, focusing on dinner consumption, an activity of utmost importance in other studies of motherhood (Charles and Kerr 1988; DeVault 1991; Lupton 1996), among nine Swedish single mothers. These women represent an extreme case of demands on combining both breadwinning and caretaking, and were, due to scarcity both time and moneywise, expected to at least express threshold activities of love.

Even though mothering may include many different activities, the analysis confirmed the everyday dinner’s central role by its contribution to the practitioners’ strivings to materialize mothering’s rather vague purposes. It showed that the purposes can be split into a number of different dinner activities that, guided by attentive love, materializes through the goods bought, processed and thrown away, and through the child’s developing body. Furthermore, the activities expressing love were not always interpreted as such by the needing child as they not necessarily meant giving the child what it wanted. Rather, the activities meant fostering it to become what was seen as being in its best interest in the long run, namely a competent member of society (cf. Riddick 1995 [1989]). To develop a relationship with the child and to make it receptive to the various love acts performed, the practitioners “brought in the fun” in ways that not necessarily made their lives easier in the short run, but that expressed hopes for making it easier in the long. This included fun with food when, for example, Camilla invited her five year old to “cook” or rather “play” with food together with her, spending far more time in the kitchen than she usually would, as a way to foster the child’s future cook skills. It also included fun while food, like when Eva promised her teenagers a greasy dinner in front of the TV – the fun – on Fridays provided they ate vegetables and helped out in the household during the rest of the week, hereby fostering responsibility and balanced eating habits. Another, more rare way was first fun then food, letting the play and the fun come to the foreground and be what actually guided the mothering practice. Linda, for example, spent most of her time playing with Leon. The dinner was squeezed in once the play was finished. In short, the fun included in mothering in many ways seemed to facilitate its long term goals, mostly as a tool involved in the dinner, but the fun could also take over and be the main activity that guided the mothering practice.

Making meal times fun: Visual representation of mothers and family meals over time in Magazine Advertising

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Drawing on a selection of food advertising and articles from Good Housekeeping (UK) this paper examines the (re)presentation of family and food through the lens of this popular women’s magazine and considers the discursive meanings around food and the family over the sixty year period. Some comparison is drawn with Australian Women’s weekly over the same time period.


This idea of mother as carer and food provisioner is reinforced in popular media and food journalism which promotes the idea of ‘the family meal, one prepared by housewife and mother’ (Warde 1997: 137; Marshall, Hogg, Davis Schneider and Petersen 2014:125). Women are not only responsible for food provisioning but for the emotional responses of their family through this provisioning process and this is seen in the advertising images in women’s magazines and early cookbooks (Burridge and Barker 2009, Burridge 2009, Hogg et al). Food advertisers, women’s magazines and cookbooks reflect this idea that providing ‘proper meals’ is the key to building the ideal family. (Warde 1997, Mosio et al 2004). There is a question over the extent to which these popular media representations might contribute to family identity management and provide scripts for these imagined happy families (Borgerson et al 2006, Heathcote 2010, Kehily and Thomson 2010).

This paper looks at a selection of family food related advertising and articles in popular women’s magazines, spanning the period 1950 to 2010. Using a data sample that included one year in each decade of the two magazines (a historical slicing sample, Martens and Scott 2005) and including all advertisements around food and the family, we identify key shifts in the depiction of the mother in producing food, family and fun. Drawing on visual discourse analysis it uses a selection of food advertising and articles from Good Housekeeping (UK) to examine the (re)presentation of family and food in this popular women’s magazine and consider the type of families depicted and discursive meanings around mothers, food and the family over the sixty year period. Some comparison is drawn with Australian Women’s weekly over the same time period. The nature of family meals appears to be changing but not the role or responsibilities of mothers in bringing joy and fun to the family meals and in producing the idyllic ‘happy family’ (Chambers 2001). The changes across the six decades examined, reveals a key shift in mothers being ‘givers of joy’ and creators of fun’ for the family to becoming ‘part of the fun of eating’. While we still see the mother as the primary
emotional worker in creating the ‘fun in food for the family’ we see her participating in the fun of consumption more. Thus, in the latter decades we see the mother as consuming not just on the behalf of the family but for herself as an individual.

We therefore see two distinct phases in the depiction of the mother and the family in relation to food and fun. The early phase, roughly covering the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s where the mother is the chief producer of food and fun for the family, and deriving her pleasure and ‘fun’ vicariously rather than directly. In the latter decades, the mother is at once the producer of food and fun as well as participant/consumer of the food and fun. Thus, in the first phase the mother produces a fun meal and serves the happy family at the table. In the second phase, she produces the meal but also consumes the food and the family fun at the table herself, directly.

This coincides with the overall construction of the mother as a producer and vicarious consumer (for the family) in the early period as described by Cook (2011) and as producer and direct consumer/participant in the latter decades. Overall however, our data shows that the mother is consistently and enduringly constructed as the person who engages in continual, ongoing labour of materializing family feeling and thus producing the family, using food as a means of channelling emotions of fun, pleasure and nurturing. Ultimately, these media representations reinforce the normative idea of ‘happy families’.

Feeding the children at school: unpacking fun food in packed lunches

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper unpacks the connection between children’s lunchboxes, fun food and leisure from the perspective of thirty British mothers who prepare school lunchboxes. Although fun is recognised as a key component of children’s food consumption (Cook 2005), the experiences of mothers providing a leisure experience through lunchboxes has been unexplored to date.

Interpretive research looking at mothering shows how discourses of care and convenience dominate mothers’ narratives of their food experiences (Moisio et al. 2004; Bugge and Almås, 2006). These discourses are usually described as a dichotomy (care-healthy food versus convenient-unhealthy food) symbolising resistance or surrender to the market penetration of domestic life (Moisio et al. 2004). Healthy food is described not simply in nutritional terms, but rather as food “from scratch” with a reduced intervention from the market (Bugge and Almås, 2006). It symbolises “good mothering”, such as mothers’ self-sacrifice of preparing “good” food for their children (Cappellini and Parsons 2012). On the contrary convenient food is mainly associated with mass produced food, ready to be consumed without any (or with a minimal) intervention by mothers (Bugge and Almås, 2006; Elliott 2007).

Convenient food targeting children has been described as fun food (Cook 2005, Elliott 2007). Fun food is not classified in nutritional terms, but rather in its “appeal of fun and play” (Elliott 2008: 269). As Elliott highlights fun food “is edible entertainment, to be consumed for reasons that have little to do with sustenance or nutrition (2008: 266). Proprietary and transgressive are two dimensions of fun food (Cook 2005). Indeed this food belongs to the children’s world since it refers to cartoon characters or famous games and it is re-categorised as a toy used for entertainment more than its nutritious purposes (Cook 2005; Elliott 2007). The transgressive nature of fun food makes it particularly appealing for children and renders problematic parents’ attempts to reduce or forbid its consumption (Cook 2005). Feeding children with convenient and fun food is often morally condemned as a sign of “lazy”, overindulgent and “un-knowledgeable” parenting, and denounced as a cause of childhood obesity (Guber and Berry 1993; Whitman 1994).

Although these studies show the market penetration of food as promising a leisure experience, we think that they do not take into consideration mothers’ own involvement in making food a leisure experience. Also seeing fun food only as a market’s offer of convenient food does not take into consideration how, how often, when, where and with whom children consume food considered fun. In order to understand mothers’ practices of providing food that their children will enjoy, this research adopts an interpretivist approach combining photo-elicitation interviews and a focus group discussion with thirty British mothers, recruited through a purposive sampling, from various primary schools in England. Parents with children aged between nine and eleven years old were targeted since children at this stage have well established food preferences and can negotiate their choices with adults (Roberts and Pettigrew, 2013). The aims of the interviews and focus group discussions were to investigate mothers’ understandings, feelings and ideas surrounding the mundane practice of making lunchboxes for their children.

Our findings reveal that mothers prefer making a packed lunch rather than opting for a school dinner, as a lunchbox is considered a gift from home. However lunchboxes are not simply a maternal gift echoing the exiting literature on feeding the children (De Vault 1991). Seen as a way of displaying good motherhood outside the home, lunchboxes are a space of daily complex negotiations between the school’s regulations, children’s request for specific brands and mothers’ own understanding of “good” food. Mothers’ understanding of a “good” packed lunch is framed as a combination of “proper” (healthy) but also “fun food” that children can enjoy.

Mothers’ understanding of fun food goes beyond the market classification of food as a convenient product. In fact three different meanings were associated with food classified as “fun”. Firstly, escapism emerges as a main justification of providing food considered enjoyable, such as “adult” food commodified by mothers to accommodate children’s requests. For example handmade sandwiches and pieces of fruit were shaped into stars and various animals. Secondly, enjoyable food was considered a transgression to the school’s regulations. For example “sneaking in”, as one mother says, food forbidden by the school (like a piece of “adult” chocolate bar), makes the experience of eating food a fun activity since it becomes a mother-child transgression of school regulations. Lastly, branded and convenient fun food is considered an “unhealthy” but crucial reward reinforcing the child’s “good behaviour” in the school setting.

In unpacking mothers’ experiences of making lunchboxes this research shows how Lunch boxes are “balanced culturally rather than nutritionally” (Metcalf et al. 2008: 405). Indeed it shows that lunchboxes are a complex process of negotiating different and contrasting requests of good mother, including the school, the child and the self. Also it shows that the relation between health-care and fun-convenience is not a dichotomy as suggested by some literature (Moisio et al. 2004; Bugge and Almås, 2006). While mothers include convenient food in order to reward their children for having eaten the more healthy part of the lunch, they also have a wider understanding of the transgressive nature of fun through food, which goes beyond the market offering and understanding of fun. The market with its offer of convenient and ready to consume fun food seems to be excluded from the reappropriation process wherein mother and child transform adult food into child food and transgress school’s regulations. In this process fun and healthy food are not a dichotomy but they are rather part of the same process of mother and child transformation of adult food into child’s food. This research sheds new light on the relation between consumption and care, showing how they are
not a dichotomy, but they are part of the same process of ‘care for the children’ providing them with both enjoyable and healthy eating.

A Prize in Every Box!
From Cracker Jack to Fun da Middles

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Fun is a powerful symbolic theme that characterizes contemporary food marketing. From PepsiCo’s Fun-for-You product portfolio and Fun da Middles cupcakes to the advertising of olives as ‘fun at your fingertips’ and Disney Flavorz (that claim to make ‘apple eating fun’), fun in terms of food marketing is becoming increasingly commonplace. Yet the everyday connection of fun with food—just like current usage of the word fun itself—is of rather recent origin. At the turn of the 19th century, the notion of ‘food fun’ was verboten. As American paediatrician Luther Emmett Holt sternly dictated to mothers in his manual The Proper Care and Feeding of Children, “young children [age 4-10] should not be allowed to play with their food, nor should the habit be formed of amusing or diverting them while eating” (1916[1894]: 147). Holt was America’s most prominent child rearing expert for nearly half a century, until the emergence of the highly popular Dr. Spock (Sealander 2005: 172) who similarly suggested that child feeding was not to be an extension of the playroom (Spock 1946: 356). How, then, did fun become a commonplace and the fulcrum of foods targeted at children? (See Cook 2005, Elliott 2008, 2009, 2009a, 2010, 2012, Schor and Ford 2007) What conditions made this possible and what does this mean? In broad terms, I am interested in tracing how we move from a place where the injunction “Don’t play with your food” transforms, with the help of commercially packaged edibles, into eating as a license to play. How did food play become acceptable and how did it become convention? And what are the implications of this kind of marketing?

Tracing back to 1912, this paper examines the rise of “fun” in connection with children’s food. The analysis incorporates extensive primary research from a variety of archival sources, with particular focus on newspaper, magazine, radio and television advertisements for food products, as well research on (historical and contemporary) cultural and marketing perspectives on childhood (see Cook 2004; Cross 1997; McNeal 1969, 1992, 1999, 2007, Mischling 2000). Advertisements in popular women’s magazines such as Chatelaine, for example, reveal how marketers first introduced the idea of packaged foods to mothers seeking to “solve the breakfast problem”. “Children think they’re confections,” asserted a 1928 advertisement for Quaker’s puffed cereal. By 1939, the idea that food could be ‘fun’ emerged in advertisements for Rice Krispies (i.e., an advertisement picturing a little girl asserting “Mommy, these Krispies are fun!”). This set the stage for the 1950s and 1960s dominance of child-targeted breakfast cereals—and the subsequent emergence of marketing such as Kraft Foods’ 1999 campaign to promote sweetened Post Cereals to children under the slogan, “The fun starts here.”

I argue that the rise of food as ‘fun’ can be understood in three unique waves. The first wave, food with toy, can be exemplified by a range of products in which companies sought to distinguish themselves from the competition and increase sales by adding in a “prize”. Cracker Jack—first mass-produced and sold at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893—was the very first company to put toy “surprises” in their packages. Starting in 1912, children could find a miniature car, animal, gun, airplane, pair of scissors, or similar item in each box. The second wave is food and toy, which is largely about modelling future gender roles and domestic labor practices for girls. It is exemplified by the Kenner Easy Bake oven. Launched in 1963, it is the first example of a toy centered around food. Kenner’s Easy Bake oven stood 14-inches tall and baked treats using the heat of two light bulbs. The toy was explicitly targeted at girls, with early advertisements cautioning “delight the little homemaker today”, and “FUN! Safe and educational, just like mommy makes!” In 1967 General Mills acquired Kenner and rebranded it the Betty Crocker Easy Bake oven, advertising miniature packaged Betty Crocker cake mixes to make the experience tastier—and “even more fun”. Finally, food as toy emerges when Jell-O advertising campaigns start explicitly telling children to play with their food — forcing parents to relax rules around eating, at least for dessert. This “food play” marketing strategy becomes dominant in the 1990s and beyond, leading to such products as FunSqueeze margarine, Fun-da-Middles cupcakes, FunBites fruit snacks, FunCheez processed cheese, not to mention crushable yogurt tubes and fruit snacks that tattoo your tongue, or oatmeal with mini sugar dinosaur eggs that ‘hatch’ with the addition of boiling water. Food as toy, I suggest, represents a fundamental shift in strategy because the food is not accompanied by a toy but has become the toy itself.

Each ‘wave’ of food fun reflects particular cultural and historical preoccupations: the ‘fun’ of the Easy Bake oven—exemplifying food and toy—was rooted in accepted domestic labour practices of the 1960s, as well as a shift in which homemakers accepted packaged foods (such as cake mixes) as part of ‘modern’ homemaking. Food as toy, in contrast, reflects a far different ‘everything for the child’ sensibility which is often coupled with dual working parents or single parent homes.

Overall, my analysis reveals how packaged foods promised creativity and entertainment for children, and how the once transgressive notion of “playing with your food” has become increasingly acceptable, largely as a result of commercially packaged foods “specialized” for children.

REFERENCES


