

Fast Food, Families and Advertising as a Cultural Site

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Abstract

Fast food advertising seeks to persuade fractured families that the atmosphere of home consumption of food can be fused into fast food outlets as part of popular culture. Fast food is niche-marketed as a desirable community ritual with slogans, songs, toys, and architectural décor. This synthesis of studies traces the ties of food, family and home to socialization, gender roles, power, identity, convenience, time, work, civility, nutrition, changes in food production and service, parenting, and the popularity of the car.

Keywords: Fast food; Families; Advertising; Culture

Introduction

In order to retain and build consumer audiences of children and families, advertisers of fast food have tried to fuse the fractured family to convince them that the decline and changes in the home consumption of food can be re-created, re-captured, re-claimed and re-produced through commodity, community and popular culture.

In the U.S., “few popular culture topics occupy a larger place in the American psyche than food” [1]. Places, palates and Presidents are popularly connected, whether in Kellogg’s “Family of Cereals” in Battle Creek, or on the tables of the First Families in the White House. There is Hershey chocolate; Atlanta coke; Golden Coors; the New York bagel; Texas toast; the Denver sandwich; and Milwaukee beer; and in the White House, “the President’s bully pulpit and the example of the first family’s own dinner table” may “promote a new culture of food.” in the multi-cultural cuisine era of President Obama [2]. In the culinary past of the presidency, there was the cherry picker (Washington); Easter eggs (Madison); alcohol (Jackson and Grant); fat (Cleveland and Taft); thin (Wilson); hot dogs served to royalty (Franklin Roosevelt); barbecue (Lyndon Johnson); meatloaf (Nixon); jelly beans (Reagan); Clinton at McDonalds; plus the first Bush who bashed broccoli and the second Bush who nearly choked on pretzels long after Garfield sipped squirrel soup [3]. Peanut farmer Carter asked for corn bread at Wendy’s in Saginaw and ex-President Reagan got \$66,000 to speak at Hardee’s hamburger convention, after the Cold War’s end when “the line outside McDonald’s in Red Square stretched longer than the line of those waiting to see Lenin’s Tomb” [4].

The popular consumption and promotion of such fast (“junk”) food like candy, cereal, and soda has been blamed by the Kaiser Family Foundation research for the increase of obese children who view 40,000 television ads a year which affect their food choices [5]. Websites now target kids by requiring proof of food purchases to play interactive “advergaming” for rewards which make them “agents of the advertiser” [6]. Food ads have been found to affect taste preferences of children as young as two when marketers get them to recognize their brands and logos and link them to unhealthful diets [7]. Targeted advertising has also created children as meat-eaters [8].

Fast food is “not merely a business, but a clue and key to culture” and part of our language, landscape and our ritual therapy of psychological and spiritual fulfillment [9]. McDonald’s “inroads into the American lifestyle and diet” represent “the leading edge of the fast food industry’s impact on American cultural geography” [10]. Linguistically, it has become a metaphorical prefix (“Mc”) and symbolic suffix (“ization”)

for the changing nature of contemporary social life with its rational standardization, predictable efficiency, working conditions replacing people with machines, and its control of leisure and recreation [11].

Food and culture have long been interwoven [12] with literature [13]; “nutritional language” [14]; history, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, geography, religion, architecture, organizations, recreation and health [15]. In the sociology of food, “eating habits are viewed as a matter of culture, a product of codes of conduct and what is eaten, how it is cooked and served, the range of choice, who does the preparation, are all a matter of material and social relationships” [16].

Family, Food and Home have Historic Ties

“Foods chosen, methods of eating, preparation, number of meals per day, time of eating and the size of portions eaten make up human foodways”, and the home and family have historically provided that social setting. Food has been a vehicle for expressing friendship, for smoothing social intercourse, and a universal medium for expressing sociability and hospitality [17].

According to Leon Kass at the University of Chicago, the “emotional link between eating and being” was established at the dining table which has been a classroom and microcosm of society where “One learns self-restraint, sharing, consideration, taking turns, and the art of conversation” [18]. Food connects us to the outside world and helps us understand it. “Our language is rife with food metaphors: life is ‘sweet’, disappointments are ‘bitter’, a lover is ‘sugar’ or ‘honey’. Truth can be easy to ‘digest’ or ‘hard to swallow’. Ambition is a ‘hunger’. We are ‘gnawed’ by guilt and we ‘chew’ over ideas. Pleasures are ‘appetites’ and extras are ‘gravy’ [18]. Indeed, language itself may have originated when mouths opened for food in a shared act of the primitive family.

Meals at the dinner table strengthen and maintain family solidarity and socialization [19]; and aid in the re-constitution of marriages after divorce [20]. We not only are where we eat, but “We are also what (emphasis added) we eat in communication terms, our expectations of food, exercise, table manners, arguments, and picking up our socks determine family behavior or personal character” [21].

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Families eating together at home promote unity, affection, self-expression, discipline, emotional health, and nutritional eating habits. It cultivates friendship, warmth and security of companions -- the French and Latin word meaning "one who eats bread with another". Meals at home nurture the psychological security of a child and "heighten the children's cognitive or knowledge-acquiring abilities along with their linguistic competence in later years" [22]. Parents talking to children at mealtime can improve their vocabulary [23].

At home, "a commitment to sharing the preparation and consumption of food can also be important to the production and maintenance of households". It is a place for drawing boundaries and identities for age, gender, home design and layout; a place to socialize and civilize children; to exchange intimate conversations and confidences, to mark seasons, festivals, childhood memories and the rites of passage [15]. It is a forum for building ties [24] in an atmosphere of "hearth, home, coziness, warmth, nourishment, security and contentment" [25].

In many ways, "the circumstances under which food is eaten are as important to good health as the food itself" [22]. The "psychological and social factors play a larger role than had been thought in determining a person's choice of food" [26]; and "it appears that it is the arrangements surrounding the preparation and consumption of meals, rather than the food itself, which merits attention" [20].

Changes in Families Challenge Food Advertisers

Massive social, economic and technological forces are changing families. There have also been changes in food production, processing, storage, distribution, packaging and marketing. More liberated women work outside the home, where they used to prepare most meals. Males have less power and presence in the home and often work two jobs at odd shifts. Long commutes mean little time to prepare meals for unsupervised children whose conflicting schedules discourage a common time and place to eat. One in three kids cooks their own meals. Fast food is also popular with single and older adults who also tend to eat sporadic and unscheduled meals alone [27].

Other patterns changing family meals are frozen food, microwaves, and TV dinners, which reduce family interaction, while they watch TV commercials that advertise fast food. Other factors include dispersed sites of home and work; and cars to get there and in which to drive to find and eat fast food. Since World War II, food abundance and convenience meant attitudes could be shaped by those selling the food and "less and less are we expected to wait for dinner, or avoid spoiling our appetites. Instead, we eat when and where we want, alone, with strangers, on the street, on a plane. Our increasing reliance on prepared foods coincides with a diminished inclination or capacity to cook, which in turn, only further separates us--physically and emotionally--from what we eat and where it comes from. Convenience completes the decades-long depersonalization of food" [18].

Despite this individual "grazing" and the decline of the family meal, "Americans idealize mothers who feed, so much so that even though television writers have made it into the '90s by getting their female characters out of the house and into the work force, they have remained in the 50s and 60s by continuing to have them call their loved ones to the table at mealtime" [22]. The Brady Bunch and Waltons at mealtime were popular. The ranking of the 10 most memorable TV moms included June Cleaver in "Leave it to Beaver" and Roseanne Conner in "Roseanne", who put meals on the table (in nostalgia and/or parody) at breakfast and dinner.

New realities in home and family have not stopped advertising, marketing and mass media from manipulating nostalgic and romantic

images of the family to create a desire for corporate commodities sold and bought for their image and convenience, but not necessarily for their nutritional value. Fast food outlets cash in on the angst over the decline of the family by connecting private emotions with products representing idealized family relations. McDonald's, for example, represents itself as a "haven in a heartless world" [28].

It seized on anxieties stimulated by separation and isolation to neutralize and conquer through consumption the commodity of fast-food in a "community of friendship and kinship". "At the same time that companies reaffirm the importance of the private world, they undermine it through commercialization" [29]. As food preparation has moved out of the home into the factory, fast food has been "designed to lure families out of the home" [30]. Amidst the "pressures of commodified life", family members are "the targets of a variety of marketing strategies geared toward increasing consumption" [30].

As the market moves into the family, the family moves into the market. In the fast food industry, "the market has entered the private realm of the family household and transferred the work done there into opportunities". Advertising lures housewives from cooking at home to "free them from the stultifying atmosphere of the kitchen and the nursery" and has turned noisy teens into patrons [30]. They can eat fast, with no need to dress up, plan or have manners; and they can enjoy playgrounds, pens and clowns which distract them from parents. "The prime target for fast food restaurants is the family unit" [17]. Fast food extends the commercial culture into a previously private and family area via popular culture that reflects and reinforces cultural themes [31].

Advertisements utilize "powerful symbolic meanings of foods, so that what is being sold is not just a product, but a lifestyle, a dream, a source of emotional fulfillment" [17]. C.W. Post, founder of General Foods, said "You don't just manufacture cereal. You've got to get it halfway down the customer's throat through advertising." This means selling the family's cultural eating "experience" more than selling food or nutrition. In this McLuhanesque process, the marketing medium is the message whereby it's faster to create the food than to create the TV commercials [32].

Techniques to Fast-Fix the Family "Experience"

Psychology and nutrition are related. Digestion begins in the mind before food is eaten. The appetite is in the eye which sees food, room furnishings, tableware and rituals of service [33]. Appealing pictures of food have been called "pornographic" by Chris Wolf of Noble and Associates. Food is a commodity with emotional and cultural values. "When food is consumed symbolically, its taste is of relatively little importance. It is the image around the food product that is most important" [34]. The "design of foods and beverages has to be driven by information on the psychology of eating and drinking" if the food business is to attract consumers [35].

"To win in the restaurant chain game, you have to provide more than just adequate food and service, marketing is a lot more than sales or advertising. There must be a reason, besides price and convenience, for consumers." [36]. That reason is the family "experience" and "atmosphere" [37], which was the key to the early popular "packaging" of food products in "roadside" restaurants, cafes, diners, stands, drive-ins and walk-ups which were familiar, easy, informal "places of comfort" which were "away from home" [38]. Even in the home today, food, family and communication are linked by ads. For example, a conservative father and liberal daughter are brought together with "family values" by eating Honey Nut Chex. "What next? Conversation?," asks the commercial touting "Generation Chex".

The popular success of fast food is due in part to its promise of “a short-cut to everlasting familial commitment”. Commercial cooking becomes an expert, technical, speedy, rational performance and “less an emotional expression of familial care and concern” with caring, loving “home cooking” [39].

Food advertisements re-create an image of this past with affectionate mothers preparing food for their children being trained for civility and good health around the family dinner table. Ads create emotional pleasures not necessarily related to food texture or nutrition, and indulgent hedonism which do not encourage asceticism [34]. Nostalgic family images are strongly upfront in TV commercials: Plain and folksy “Cliff” is everybody’s uncle in IHOP; So was Dave Thomas in Wendy’s (named for his daughter), and the finicky grandmother who asked “Where’s the beef?” The late Colonel Sanders remains a universal grandfather for Kentucky Fried Chicken, which reverted to his sales pitch “We do chicken right” after an unappealing and short-lived campaign for its chicken sandwiches showed chickens driving a bus [40].

Popeye’s and Church’s built their popularity with dinner sales. Whataburger uses an old black and white 1950s photo to boast that its food tastes like it was “cooked at home by real folks”. Denny’s updates its image with a 1950s retro-style neon, jukebox motif with employees wearing bowling shirts to appeal to a nostalgic-minded younger set of consumers. Faced with black families charging racial discrimination, Denny’s in Watts served soul food (oxtails, chitterlings, collard greens and sweet potato pie) [41]. Its corporation president, John Romandetti, said “I don’t want to change the image of a family-style restaurant because that really is our heritage” [42]. Such “Dining out has the capacity to transform emotions into commodities which are made available to the individual as if they were consumer items. A sense of family unity is sold with the McDonald’s hamburger” [43].

McDonald’s does it all for Consumers

Probably no fast food franchise has marketed advertising of family and home as popular culture as effectively as McDonald’s with its individualistic service slogans: “You Deserve a Break Today” and “We Do It All for You”. Its “marketing to the mind” was “as high as it could go on the motivational hierarchy” as it “revolutionized the fast food business—at the motivational level—by shifting the reason for dining out from physical survival to spiritual survival: kids, family fun, family values, love, compassion, concern. It is what good parents do with their children, it is the ‘right thing’ to do” [44].

McDonald’s is marketed as a “romantic, ardent, loving, passionate, and amorous experience. It is a place where love can be re-experienced, or reborn, and where experiences can be renewed. It is marketed directly to children, who in turn market to their parents. When parents are marketed by their own children, this phenomenon arouses and creates mild to moderate parental guilt and the parents almost always acquiesce” [44].

Children may have learned food behavior at home, but “as children grow up and spend more time away from home, direct parental influence declines. Increasing knowledge and awareness of the many roles of food, acquired through contact with mass media, peer group members and a wider variety of social encounters become influential” [45]. TV’s fast food commercials “encourage children to resist parental definitions of ‘good food’” and to re-define the family diet with fashionable foods [15]. Where once it was the comic “Popeye” gaining strength eating un-tasty, unpopular spinach, now it is the child at the

kitchen table reluctant to take his parents’ advice to drink his orange juice until a movie actor enters the kitchen and urges he drink it, and the child believes him instead of his parents and proceeds to drink it.

Dining away from home is promoted in TV fast food commercials which reach children who are heavy watchers of TV commercials, and who don’t read newspapers [46]. In addition, researchers have found that almost 75 percent of the food eaten on prime time TV shows is junk food eaten between meals, and rarely do people on TV sit down and eat as a family [47]. Some food producers pressure schools to advertise and consume their coin-machine products [15].

Research indicates parents yield to children on food choices. There is “a strong positive relationship between yielding behavior and the mother’s attitude toward advertised products” and a “powerful influence in the purchase “by mothers of dry cereals, especially in lower income families with more TV viewing by children [48]. Mothers and children in low income families also tend to be more positive (and less critical) of TV advertising [49]. “After all, the target for fast food and family restaurant marketers are those consumers—largely families from the lower- and middle-income ranks with children.” [50]. Hardee’s built a strong brand loyalty around these “rural and blue-collar markets” [51]. Others have calculated and competed for family niches with targeted ads, especially children. Fast food success belongs to those who are able to change and adapt [52].

Media Try to Re-connect the Family to Eating

Advertising dollars are the route to sales success in the competitive \$100 billion fast food “burger wars”, where the leading chains already spend millions: McDonald’s \$578 million and Burger King \$423 million in 1997; and Wendy’s \$250 million in 1999 [40]. Ads have been sensitive to schedules and routines of the younger consumers, their eating behaviors, and their desire to be freed from adult tastes and manners.

Wendy’s, with its late popular founder Dave Thomas who “really personifies the Wendy’s experience”, “beefed up” its ad budget early in 1998 “because consumers tend to stay home after eating and spending too much time there [40]. The fastest growing franchise, Subway sandwiches, competes with McDonald’s “Big Mac” and Burger King’s “Whopper” with its “Smile and Bite” in which “a slightly rotund junior executive races out of an office building and sprints across town, passing marathon runners all the way, in order to burn up the fat calories he’s about to consume with his burger” [53].

Pizza Hut made its “greatest new product introduction in the company’s history” and increased its sales 25% with its cheese-stuffed crust ads targeted toward 18-49-year old males watching the Final Four NCAA Basketball on CBS and the Stanley Cup hockey finals on Fox [54]. Carl’s Jr. used a TV commercial showing uncivil food scenes of the Three Stooges and a campaign slogan “If it doesn’t get all over the place, it doesn’t belong in your face” [55].

The first national exposure for Atlanta-based Chick-Fil-A, (a half-million dollar deal with its first cable contract with The Family Channel) was launched during “back to school and holidays” with product-tie-ins to the TV channel programs and store displays featuring the family channel logo [56]. Some years back, the Roy Rogers burger chain dropped its highly successful campaign to get kids to snack on its fast food in school cafeterias, after cafeteria workers complained the ads were unkind to them by showing them as “lunch ladies, who dished up dismal casseroles to the tune of ‘See You in September’” [57].

Teen sales were boosted at Taco Bell by the ads showing the feisty, Spanish-speaking chihuahua which “has become part of the popular

culture vernacular” [40]. Eagerly competitive Taco Bell targeted the “Generation X” 18-24-year-olds with CD and tape music give-aways, its first Superbowl spot, and a movie-tie-in to Paramount’s “Congo”, which was “considered in Hollywood circles” to be “too violent to have inked Big Mac or Burger King for their typical all-family and kid-targeted promos” [58].

Re-creating the family experience dominated Burger King’s campaign to surpass McDonald’s sales. It showed how Burger King looks, cooks, and hooks children. Much of the kitchen is open for viewing so those waiting in line can see flames flickering in the broiler. There is a “virtual fun center” with the usual playground equipment but also electronic kiosks with interactive games and video-conferencing for kids to chat with other kids in another Burger King [59].

The corporation found that customers would eat there more often if they had a more pleasant environment, a stress-free experience, less crowds, tables not bolted to the floor, and easier to read menus [59]. The corporation had revised its menu boards to reflect different price groups and had tried to shift upscale with dinner baskets and table service [51]. It tried to balance youth individuality with family conformity through its slogans “Have it Your Way” and “Sometimes You Gotta Break the Rules”. But when teen heart throb Dan Cortese screamed to Gen-Xers “I love this place”, the ad “sent a mixed message by touting specials designed for families with young children” [60].

Burger King appealed to parents, kids, teens and young adults as a sponsor of the family movie “Anastasia” on the Fox Kid’s Network [61]. It also teamed up with Kraft Foods and the Nickelodeon cable channel in a \$20 million project whereby the channel telecast “secret” on-screen images that could be decoded using Nickel-O-Scopes in Kraft kids-brand packages. Burger King offered action figures toys and puppets through its kids meals tied to network shows, including the promotion of the movie “Rugrats”. Burger King Vice-President of Marketing Services, Richard Taylor, saw the tie-in as “a great brand fit” saying “Both of us want to speak to kids, not at them” [62]. Fast food customers were offered trinkets from “Star Wars”, Happy Meal toys, Teletubbies, Teenie Beanie Babies, teddy bears and plastic Furbies to reproduce the family atmosphere [59].

McDonald’s: The Marketed Model for Family Food

With its 25,000 stores selling fast food in 115 countries after starting with one store in suburban Chicago in 1955, “No other retailer is so ubiquitous around the world” [59]. The culture and entertainment of family and children has been as crucial as the consumption of its food and nutrition. “We’re not in the hamburger business; we’re in show business”, is an old Kroc homily [63]. “We are first of all, in the real estate business”, said McDonald’s President Harry Sonneborn [64].

Founder Ray Kroc preached “the gospel of quality, service, cleanliness and value” and said in his autobiography

Grinding it Out, The Making of McDonald’s

“I speak of faith in McDonald’s as if it were a religion. I believe in God, family and McDonald’s--and in the office, that order is reversed.” [65]. Fast food restaurants are a kind of church, whose decor, menu, and conversation between counter-clerk and customer are so unvaried and dependable as to have become a kind of comforting ritual, according to anthropologist Conrad Kottak [18].

Taking kids off the streets and giving them jobs with low skills and low pay was an early McDonald’s aim. After car hops faded at its suburban sex-playground hangouts, the corporation switched to

an emphasis on families and “targeted the suburbs for development because of McDonald’s orientation to the family market” [63]. When the corporation first sought a national mass marketed “media magic” image in the late 1960s, it “treated eating out as a family event”. For young adults, it was “a fun place for families to go” to “escape to an island of enjoyment”--Moms escaping meals, Dads escaping work hassles, kinds escaping the disciplined home dinner table. The deserved “break” to “get up and get away” for food, folks and fun became the best known commercial song on TV along with the popular tongue twister on the ingredients of the “Big Mac” [63].

The consumer bought the “secular communion” and internal decor under the new “family-oriented mansard roof” and “the icons that one sees in the television advertisements and in cartoon books.” [66]. Eating at McDonald’s became “a substitute for home and love” with “No broccoli, no tablecloths, and no forks. Sheer bliss. It’s easier to sell fun than it is to sell nutrition”, and “nutrition had little or nothing to do with” fast food marketing [67,68]. As for charges its food was plastic and processed, the corporation responded saying its food was prepared with the same loving care of trusted mothers or for children at home with families [34].

Reaching kids through Teenie Beanie Babies commercials was hugely successful in McDonald’s contract with the NBA because more youth played basketball than football. A contract with the NFL was not renewed for 100 million toys for a Happy Meal promotion which “sparked an unexpected frenzy among customers” who gobbled up the toys in two weeks, but threw away the meals! In 1998, McDonald’s introduced a new McHappy Meal Girl doll. When a drink was held up to her mouth, she emitted a drinking sound; when a hamburger was held up to her mouth, she took a bite [40]. Eating habits and manners have moved from home to the fast food restaurant.

Appeals to children were made in TV spots showing a teen-ager using a French fry as a baton to conduct a school of fish like an orchestra; and another showed parents coaxing their twins into a swimming pool by promising them a trip to McDonald’s [40]. In another pre-teen demographic parental persuasion, the tables were turned at a family gathering with kids sitting at the adult table and grown-ups squeezed around a rickety card table [40]. An adult McBurger-sandwich got negative reaction from kids after adults told the company “they want more reasons to come to McDonald’s to satisfy their more mature taste requirements” [69]. McDonald’s in 1989 even appealed to working adult customers by providing fax machines, table phone jacks, copies of the Wall Street Journal, and sock hops, antique car shows, and volleyball for nearby apartment dwellers [70].

Media are the Messengers of Meals

In 1994, McDonald’s own communications network (MCN) was linked to video satellite technology and staged its first music promotion selling more than seven million compact discs and cassettes of popular music at discount prices to customers who buy certain items from its menu [71]. It had also experimented with its own low power FM McRadio in Sandwich, Illinois, whereby patrons with car radios could hear commercials and then get Drive-Thru Radio service, earlier called “radio on a stick” [59]. By 1998, ads were being adjusted to daytime car driving [72] and later outdoor billboard ads were used.

In 1996, McDonald’s added cable TV to target niche markets to retain the firm’s family audience “on their own terms at their own time”. They sponsored cable shows, developed programs and conducted contests. Cable sales staffs worked with programmers to accommodate sponsors.

Cable outlets gave McDonald's a chance to become part of the fabric of that channel, according to Ken Dice, vice-president and media director for Leo Burnett. McDonald's not only reached customers, "They reach audiences and make them think that McDonald's is part of what they do, an ongoing presence on that network". In trying to become a part of the brand name of cable networks, "We take ourselves from just being an advertiser to weaving ourselves into what the cable channel is about", Dice explained [73].

Use of the movies as a market medium has had a strong family emphasis. McDonald's promoted movies on videotape for "Jurassic Park" and "The Flintstones". Kroc himself appeared briefly in "A Touch of Class". The children's charity clown, Ronald McDonald, appeared in 1988 in his first movie, "Mac and Me", financed by an anonymous investor, although the production crews were served free cokes and only Coca Cola is served at McDonald's [74].

McDonald's connected its name with family values via its joint sponsorship of "Beethoven's 2nd" about a lovable Saint Bernard. They served meals on Beethoven tray liners and featured the movie on the cover of its 4.5 million circulation kid's magazine [75]. McDonald's promoted its "Super Hero Burger" when it became a licensing partner with Warner Brothers in its release of "Batman Forever" in 1995. (Burger King did so similarly with "Lion King").

Batman's "promotional link with Big Mac gives a (film) property instant credibility, opening doors to other partners and dollars" and goes beyond the burger on the menu and the popular movie costumes and celebrities' store visits. The vice-president of McDonald's Promotion, Sports and Presence Marketing, Dean Barrett, described the strategy: "Being the granddaddy of promotions allows McDonald's to combine new products as in its recent tie with a clutch of NBA stars and Warner Brothers' Looney Tunes characters. At the last minute, McDonald's slipped Michael Jordan into its menu mix, hailing the basketball star's return to the game by re-branding its specialty Big Mac sandwich as the 'Michael Jordan McBacon Deluxe'. Barrett sees promotional efforts as a way to keep McDonald's as a fun place for families. People come to expect that a visit to McDonald's will always be entertaining and comprised of, not only great food at a great value, but a fun experience. "Our brand is fun" [76]. A supportive view is that Junk food is "fun", "honest" and the "last frontier", but the "nutrition police and food fascists want us to feel ashamed if we like it" [77].

Film, food, family and fantasy are culturally interwoven in the "empires of popular culture" of McDonald's and Disney, although the two parted business since that insightful comparison was made [78] of how both appeal to wholesome family entertainment and to the child's taste and mentality with mascots like Mickey Mouse and Ronald McDonald. Both provided a "promise of instant gratification in the almost instantaneous delivery of fantasy and food" and "adults are led or badgered by their children to pay visits to Disneyland or to eat at McDonald's" [78].

"While Disney made apt use of his film and television production to plug the parks, McDonald's began as a place network and afterwards launched a hefty television advertising program which produced the fantasy character of the clown and the humanoid food items to reinforce McDonald's consciousness [78]. Both provided a sanctuary from the "distresses and pressures of the nuclear family" in a "clean and attractive haven for families as a barrier against the corruption of the outside world" with the "defensive quality of temples dedicated to preserving a sense of safety and certainty" [78].

Certainty, Civility, Community, Children and Crime

Safety and security are highly problematic in American public life, especially in dense and fixed congregations like fast food eating sites, where crime has increased and endangered lives of young workers as well as customers [79]. These range from the deaths of pizza deliverers in traffic [80] and ambush murders in home delivery, to the murder of four girls in Austin's unsolved 1996 "I Can't Believe It's Yogurt" shop murders; the cafeteria murder scenes in Killeen, Texas and Littleton, Colorado; and the March 2000 shootings and prayer-march vigils at fast food outlets in suburban Pittsburgh. Perhaps the most dramatic and significant was the 1984 massacre of 21 people (mostly poor Mexican-American children) in a popular family setting at McDonald's in San Ysidro, California.

McDonald's later demolished its building and gave the land to the city which sold it to a community college which built on it, where a monument and memories of McDonald's remain, while a new McDonald's prospers at another site [81]. Meanwhile, the corporation has touted its food and care for families and children in hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and the 1992 Los Angeles riots, where McDonald's "safe and clean" image and sites were not harmed by arson, vandalism or looting [63]. Conscious of any connections to violence, it did cancel its ads sponsoring the violent TV series, "The Untouchables" [82].

The demise of civility, once learned at dining tables in the 19th Century, has been linked to public violence by brutes and barbarians who feed and eat, while only the cultured dine [25]. Neither grace nor the graceful prevail, as children in public are impolite, unsharing, self-centered; can't wait for food (which they often play with or throw) while they talk or sing while eating; and fail to learn which manners or utensils to use [83].

It is argued that commercialized public "styles of interaction encouraged in the restaurant produce an uncivilized society", which supports the ideas of Simmel, Goffman and Elias that the modern individual's character is shaped by a long history of manners in which human consciousness can't be separated from the public realm [43]. Particularly, "the exchange between customer and restaurant crew also illustrates the structural barriers to civilized sociability" as fast-food personnel are trained for specific conversational "formulaic exchanges" which prevent any recognition of the other as unique. Each diner is treated indiscriminately, despite the well-publicized promise that "We do it all for you" [43].

The commercial commodification of food has been blamed for the breakdown of family and community. "Advertising is strongly associated with overproduction" and media messages urge people to eat more than they need. "Companies fight it out to control our stomachs from morning to night" and mass production and mass consumption require large-scale advertising [84]. "Will the real imperialism of the future be not by the military but the media. Will the nation that feeds the people control the people?" [9]. The closeness of food production and consumption has been separated, and despite the corporate logos, colors and ads used, "few of these corporate hits began as businesses with close ties to the eating communities from whence hamburgers, fried chicken, or pizza came" [19].

The formation of these "consumption communities" by corporations validates Marx's "commodity fetishism", the separation of "cuisine and community" and the civic responsibilities of private corporations relative to democracy and a public culture [85]. Fast food enterprises have profited by re-creating images for family and social change, but

public violence hints all is not so well as the fantasies suggest. Real problems may not be solved in “Lake Edna”, the imaginary, utopian town used in the Kentucky Fried Chicken commercial; or in McDonald’s “Hamburger University” or through “down-home” Hardee’s move to the big-city [86].

Like families, local and small towns have also been enveloped by the nationalized franchises, affecting their traffic, socialization, eating and nutritional habits [87]. That continues an early pattern of fast food sites chosen in areas “appropriate for a family-oriented dinner house operation” with maximum accessibility, parking, visibility, trade areas, acceptable zoning, and profits [88]. Whether there can be a commercially successful return to the diners’ laid back atmosphere and “down home features” amidst changes in taste and ads is yet to be seen. Some see the revived 1950s diners as “a focal point of the community” like the fictional and intimate get-away tavern in TV’s “Cheers”, “Where everybody knows your name” [89].

The Future of Fast-Food and Families: Past as Prologue

The young will likely be served first in the future---faster and freer, with flexible food folkways and family re-defined. More and faster food will be available and convenient in airports, sports stadia, hospitals, military bases, food courts, convenience stores and toy shops [40,90]. There will likely be more interactive, youth-friendly, computerized orders [91]; mobile canteens [92]; rolling restaurants [93]; eating in cars--while driving [94]; and self-service and home delivery, as “the dining experience moves full cycle; from home to restaurant and then back again to the home” [44].

Those alarmed by a decline in families eating together at home are reminded that the family dinner is a source of tension and conflict and a threat to individuality [95]; and that “as meaningful as dinnertime can be, there’s a risk in mistaking correlation for causality” since families can also come together on trips, in front porch talks, at work, and at kids’ events [96]. Family meals were ideals and myths of the past, it is argued. Mealtime was divisive; women were servants and waitresses, rather than fellow diners, and the upper classes seldom ate as a family while the poor often had no tables [97].

As for the uncivil superficiality of eating out, it is argued that it is not a passive, predictable and homogeneous experience [98]. Different people seek different pleasures; responsible customers are genuinely engaged with others, and are not duped by surreptitious sales techniques [99]; and “grazing” can even be nutritious [100].

As newly-defined families emerge in a post-modern, non-sexist home with less patriarchal power over dinner-time discipline, critics of capitalist commodification hope for a more educated and emancipated consumer in new generations. Already, many youth join vegetarians and animal rights activists to protest and boycott fast food exploitation of the natural environment, pesticides, additives, preservatives and growth hormones. Anti-McDonald billboards advocate “The animals deserve a break today”: and urge “McDonald’s cruelty to go” [101].

Some are enthusiastic about food and farm collectives, resent institutional junk food franchises, and challenge impractical, authoritarian eating schedules, menus, etiquette and eating styles. Greater flexibility and individuality in tastes are gaining popularity in health-conscious circles where “heart-smart” foods and diets are cautious about salt, sugar, fat, cholesterol, allergies, food poisons, and how they affect the body, health and safety [102]. (Burger King recalled more than 25 million dangerous pokemon ball toys distributed with kids’ meals in late 1999.)

Greater democratic food choice may affect food standardization and popularize local flavors and tastes like ethnic foods. The international spread of American-style fast food has aroused site and service boycotts in Israel [59] and in Western Europe, where “Mad Cow” disease has lurked. If billions of burgers are not sold in Belgium and Beijing or in the Muslim world, both the commodity and community of fast food could face a skeptical re-examination and perhaps a second look at the communal production, preparation and sharing of food as a cultural and communication experience.

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