Consumption Markets & Culture

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gcmc20

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Available online: 06 Jan 2010

To cite this article: Tanja Schneider & Teresa Davis (2010): Advertising food in Australia: Between antinomies and gastro-anomy, Consumption Markets & Culture, 13:1, 31-41
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10253860903346740

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Advertising food in Australia: Between antinomies and gastro-anomy

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Over the past half century, consumers in Australia have increasingly been confronted with a plethora of health food products. This paper focuses on health food that encourages consumption through the promise of health benefits. In this context, media representation of such food serves as a lens to explore the spread of consumer culture in Australia. Using a historical perspective, this paper asserts that in promoting such foods, food “experts” form an advisory nexus in an increasing context of “gastro-anomy” that Fischler (1980) speaks of. Fifty years of advertising, editorial content and articles are examined from the \textit{Australian Women’s Weekly}. Warde’s (1997) antinomies of tastes are used as a starting point to show how the anxiety and risks associated with food consumption are built up and allayed.

\textbf{Keywords:} food cultures; antinomies

\section*{Introduction and background}

The willingness to try new foods and thus to make changes to one’s diet that may lead to new dietary habits has been addressed by Claude Fischler, a French sociologist. According to him homo sapiens, who are naturally omnivores, are faced with the dilemma that they need variety in their diets and consequently search for a wide-ranging food intake. However, at the same time new, unknown foods could be poisonous. Fischler describes this problem as the “omnivore’s paradox”; that is, “the oscillation between the two poles of neophobia (prudence, fear of the unknown, resistance to change) and neophilia (tendency to explore, the need for change, novelty, variety)” (1988, 278; see also 1980).

It is this tension between neophobia and neophilia that Fischler identifies as the underlying anxiety of people’s relationships with food. Or as Korsmeyer notes, “Because eating … not only nourishes but poisons, eating is a small exercise in mortality” (1999, 145). Food choice according to Fischler becomes a source of anguish – in particular in a state of “gastro-anomy” where strict rules and norms around eating have waned (1980, 948). Using Warde’s antinomies of taste as a starting point, we argue that the food industry in conjunction with nutritionists and other “experts” attempts to fill the “collapse of normative regulation” (1997, 31) by allaying anxiety and offering self-regulatory practices as solutions (e.g., eating lite and fat-free). Using a socio-historical analysis of one popular women’s magazine, namely the \textit{Australian Women’s Weekly (AWW)}, we try to identify possible actors through our examination of food-related reportage and advertising.

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The diets-making complex

Dixon and Banwell coined the term “diets-making complex” (DMC) to describe what they found when exploring the “intersectoral partnerships” that exist between the food industry, public health authorities, nutritionists and some research scientists. They suggest that the power in the food system lies in the interrelated relationships and common interests that key players in the food system hold (Dixon and Banwell 2004, 118).

The difference in this approach from that of the Foucauldian approach of Santich (1995), Crotty (1995) or Lupton (1996) is in the recognition that control of the system lies not in the outcome of the struggle between the “experts” and the consumers, but in the strategic nexus that key players such as the food industry and research scientists build, which has the potential to shape and direct food consumption patterns. The authors admit that the ultimately bleak Foucauldian premise remains, that consumer choice is a farcical notion when even the most empowered, resisting of consumers is caught in a nexus that most of them are even unaware exist.

Dixon and Banwell (2004) suggest that the increasing distance between the spheres of production and consumption as well as the disembedding process of delocalization have left consumers unable to understand the traditional reasons behind ways of consuming the global choice of food they need to negotiate. This increase in choice initially does appear to “empower” the consumer, but ultimately the hyper choice (Mick, Broniarczyk, and Haidt 2004) of available and conflicting discourses leaves the consumer confused. Thus in Fischler’s (1980) scenario of gastro-anomy, consumers look to experts to redefine their knowledge about food and its production and consumption.

Thus, as Giddens describes it:

> With the increased efficiency of global markets, not only is food abundant, but a diversity of foodstuffs is available for the consumer all the year round. In these circumstances, what one eats is a lifestyle choice, influenced by, and constructed through, vast numbers of cookbooks, popular medical tracts, nutritional guides and so forth. (1992, 31–32)

Two studies have particularly informed our research. The first is Marion Nestle’s (2002) account of how American food corporations often co-opt medical researchers, nutritionists and journalists thus influencing diets (the idea of “corporate diets”). The second and more contextually relevant is the concept of the DMC that Dixon and Banwell (2004) and Dixon, Sindall and Banwell (2004) illustrate in the Australian context using examples of partnership cases between the food industry, nutritionists, scientists and public health authorities. While our data are confined to one publication in “popular media,” we argue that *AWW* is one of the most influential diffusers of food, health and diet trends in the country. Thus the study of the way cultural, social and even political institutions drive consumption situates the consumption phenomenon in the “macro” perspective, which may serve to illustrate better the micro-level reactions of consumers themselves.

Advertising as a cultural mediator?

The idea of culture as being actively created with ideological purpose is not a new one (Adorno 1991). Bourdieu ([1993] 2000) points out how the advertising industry
constructs for consumers the ideal lifestyle, moving them to actively acquire and consume these products.

Featherstone (1991, 5) extends this idea and calls these “new cultural entrepreneurs and intermediaries” as those who take on the role of teaching the consumers how and what to consume. It is suggested that this transfer of the aesthetics and pleasure of consuming occurs today much more through the arbiters of popular culture, such as the system of advertising (Leiss, Kline, and Jhally 1990), than through the traditional social institutions of the state or religion.

Cronin (2004) re-emphasizes the power and reach of Adorno’s “culture industry” in her study of advertising practitioners and their role as “cultural intermediaries.” However, she questions the implicit assumption, made by much of the past critiques of the advertising and marketing systems (Ewan 1976; Goldman 1992; Williamson 1978), that they are “cultural intermediaries.” That the sphere of production with its categories of exchange and value have to be explained and translated to the world of consumers assumes separation. Cronin argues that this is an underestimation of the power of these systems. In claiming to be only “intermediaries,” the advertising and marketing systems disclaim responsibility for the “original” message. The assumption is therefore that there is an “original” use-value inherent that the advertiser merely “translates” to the consumer. She suggests that the role of these “intermediaries” is actually a great deal more complex. She opens up the possibility of their role as “reclassifiers” of categories of products. A cheap box of chocolates can be symbolically enhanced as a valued gift; the advertising industry in the branding process not only attaches new meaning and value to the product, but attaches a “set of potential emotional responses to them” (Cronin 2004, 363; see also Barthel 1989).

She takes the argument further, suggesting that branding, advertising and ultimately all marketing practices actively serve as a process of classifying, reclassifying and ordering and creating distinctions (most often in terms of its sign value) between products (see also Veblen [1899] 1998). It becomes, as she calls it, “an organising nexus” (Cronin 2004, 364).

Food and cuisine are one of the most “culturally significant” categories of consumption and would therefore be very much the focus of the “culture industries.” In looking at the way “health” foods have become part of the diet of ordinary Australians, advertising in one source provides clues about the change in the way these industries have influenced the thinking and perceptions about food and its consumption as well as its relationship to health and nutrition.

To the extent, however, that the commercial exchange system is only the “ritualised expression of an ideology of the market” (Miller 2002), consumers do not necessarily engage in this exact practice; consumer response cannot constitute proof that the symbolic value of the brand is “read” correctly. If examination of the intent of the system – of the systems of production; of overlapping social, political and cultural systems; and of the “intermediaries” – is to be carried out, one must look beyond the consumers’ reading of these sign systems.

The case for socio-historical analysis of documentary evidence

In looking for evidence of the systematic construction of meaning and instructions on ways of consuming, one could look to consumers responses; however, individual variations and a lack of consensus is almost inevitable in taking this perspective. Thus it may make more methodological sense to explore evidence created and
manifested by the institutions of the time. Documentary evidence in this instance may provide better insights into the phenomenon than speaking to consumers or directly to the “producers,” such as the manufacturers. In attempting to consider the phenomenon of functional foods, one needs to look beyond the single point in time. Strasser makes the case for historical analysis very clearly: “Nor may consumers perceive changes in production and distribution even as they help make them, over the course of long transition, they might recognize new practices and routines only in retrospect” (2003, 378).

Trends or patterns in consumption may been seen as blips and dips on a sales curve, at a given point in time, but most socially significant changes can be seen most clearly in retrospect when looked at over a longer span of time and consumption activity. Thus the most appropriate way to contextualize a consumption phenomenon is to look at it in its historical setting. In an attempt therefore to examine the question “are functional foods a socio-culturally constructed phenomenon?”, we have adopted a historical analysis of documentary evidence. The documentary evidence used covers a span of 50 years in the post-World War II period and one influential popular publication.

Unlike many consumer research undertakings where consumers’ perspectives, views and experiences are used to build an objective or subjective (depending on the paradigmatic underpinnings of the study and methods used) view of consumption, this study uses documentary evidence. The tradition of applying methods from cultural anthropology and sociology to consumer behaviour is not a new one (see Hodder 2000), but it is under-utilized.

**Documentary evidence**

Much of consumer research rests on the use of direct spoken/written evidence from consumers about their responses to advertisers’ and corporations’ attempts to influence them. The meaning of advertisements, for example, could be identified through the way consumers “read” the advertisement (Stern 1993). While this may be useful in understanding the consumption of advertising, the perspective taken by this study is from the “other side of the lens.” It attempts to use the sources of material evidence to try and identify the intent of the “producer.” In taking a “meso-level” analytical approach to the process we see that the Advertising as material evidence could provide a snapshot of the representations of food and its consumption during the decades in question.

The need to look at such material evidence was seen as the best way to reveal the “intent” and go beyond only the interpretation of the advertisements themselves. Historical accounts of the political and legal changes that were concurrently taking place served to substantiate the picture we were piecing together. We therefore make the case for the use of material evidence to examine this research question. The rationale for the methodology used has three main reasons drawn from Hodder’s (2000) justification for the use of material evidence:

1. The material evidence is meaningfully and intentionally created/produced by processes that are the subject of study.
2. A reflexive “reading” of these pieces of material evidence needed to be carried out to explore “how they are produced, used and what meanings they may have, what they are seen to be or to represent culturally speaking” (18).
(3) Data that explore the intent, purpose and processes of creation of meaning in this particular case are not available except through material cultural evidence.

To reveal the underlying purpose of “orchestrating” (Hand and Shove 2004) by the food industry, we use evidence from a single powerful source of popular culture. Additional evidence is gathered from the historical accounts of social change (Santich 1995; Symons 1982), which may have had a major influence on the representation of functional foods in popular culture. We employ primarily “visual” data with an added facet of socio-historical analyses of such data.

**Method and sample**

Using the methods of sampling that Hand and Shove (2004) as well as Martens and Scott (2005) have used, we used the *AWW* as an example of a long-running and popular magazine for the home.

It describes itself on its website as the magazine that has “become a ‘bible’ for Australian women.” This is echoed by its circulation figures. It is the most widely read popular monthly magazine in the country with 2,644,000 readers (Roy Morgan 2005; Audit Bureau of Circulation 2005). It has a long history in Australia, celebrating its 70th birthday in 2003 (founded in 1933). In the 1950s and 1960s, one in four Australian households subscribed to it, and it enjoyed the highest circulation per head of any women’s magazine in the “Western” world (Sheridan 2000).

**Sample**

Using Martens and Scott’s (2005) sampling as a precedent, we sampled the first year of every decade considered (1951, 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001). For each of the first years of each of the first four decades, we sampled the first weekly issue in January, the second weekly issue in February, the third weekly issue in March and so on through the 12 months for the year (i.e., 12 of the 50–51 issues for the year). However, since 1983, when the *AWW* went monthly – i.e., for the 1991 and 2001 samples – we used every monthly issue, i.e., 12 monthly issues a year. Thus an overall sample of 72 issues was examined.

The magazine issues were examined primarily for advertisements of food, particularly those with overt health claims and with special added ingredients that had a special health benefit. We included all such advertisements including categories of generic food as well as branded food advertisements. In addition to the advertisements of food themselves, we also examined the editorial content: articles, nutritional advice and health tips.

**Methodology**

The food advertisements as well as the food editorials were scrutinized. The advertisements were classified into recurring themes surrounding health foods. The themes were categorized along a time-line showing where the same theme recurs or is contradictory across the decades and where the themes coalesce during a particular decade. In some instances where issues were debated and had clear references to events in the larger social, political or legislative context, we tried to link these and paint a fuller picture using other historical accounts of the time.
All articles, editorials and advertisements and comments that were related to food with a health claim or focus were systematically selected and copied from the microfilm archives, or photocopied in the case of hard copy issues. A subsequent 379 advertisements, 52 editorials and 36 articles were used as a focus for our interpretations. Thus the sample was in some sense a random one but refined based on category usefulness and relevance to the objective at hand.

**Analysis and interpretation**

Two coders independently coded the advertisements, which resulted in two lists of “main themes”; these two lists were then reduced to one consolidated list that included all the themes that appeared in both lists and additionally themes that could be combined because of the similarity of themes suggested by both lists. Thus a consensus about the themes that the data suggested was arrived at.

In categorizing the advertisements themselves, a recurrence of themes was looked for, with at least five advertisements/editorials/articles in a year needed to constitute a definite theme. This was looked for across the years in a similar fashion.

Each advertisement/editorial/article was carefully scrutinized based on textual copy and the accompanying visuals. Recurring words and phrases were noted on the photocopied advertisement/article. Particular note was made of branded mentions of products in articles and editorials. When this was noted, the advertisements in the issue were also carefully examined to see if the advertised branded products were also being “product placed” in the editorial content. The interrelated mention of such branded food products could be an indication of the DMC that Dixon and Banwell (2004) speak of.

The final set of themes are presented as our findings, and we try to explain after attempting to contextualize them, where and why they emerge.

**Findings**

We present our findings as two separate themes that are interlinked. These two themes together constitute the social construction of health and well-being foods that use direct or indirect health claims over five decades in Australia. We explain the diet-making nexus using an example from our data, and a second theme based on Warde’s idea of antinomies is explained below.

**The diet-making nexus**

Overall the idea of the existence and functioning of the DMC that Dixon and Banwell (2004) refer to is seen in many instances of the industry joining hands with scientific research and with nutritional experts. We prefer, however, to call this a diet-making nexus (DMN), because of the interrelatedness of these institutions, which may not necessarily be as organized or operate in a concerted way as Dixon and Banwell (2004) and Dixon, Sindall and Banwell (2004) suggest.

The clearest example of this nexus is an *AWW* article (1991) entitled “Eating better for less”. This article uses the guidelines from the “Australian Nutrition Foundation, and recipes from our test kitchen and the *ANF* co-sponsors. Our 16-page booklet will help to keep you healthy, fit and satisfied” (249–50). On the next page is a figure called the “Healthy Diet Pyramid,” which is the part of the healthy eating guide put out by
the Australian Nutrition Foundation (ANF, now Nutrition Australia, a registered NGO community-based organization). This pyramid, which is familiar to most international audiences, is a classification of four to five categories of generic food groups as “to be eaten most,” “eaten moderately” and “eaten in small amounts” (249–50). However, in this version, the generic categories have specific branded examples in brackets. For example, under the dairy category, the examples within the brackets include Slim, Shape, Tone, Physical Rev, Skimmer (all brands belonging to Parmalat or Fronterra Brands). This, when combined with the information in the text of the article, begins to shed light on the “cosponsors of ANF” that are not mentioned elsewhere in the text. The text included under the heading “Healthy hints” suggests: “Keep a stock of inexpensive convenience foods on hand such as canned fruit, tomatoes, tomato paste … Sanitarium Savoury brown lentils, Birds Eye frozen vegetables (Simplot), Nanda Pasta (Nestle’s), etc. …”, and another healthy hint: “Keep Peter’s Light Ice-Cream in the freezer…. Peter’s Fruit de Light (Fronterra Brands), Danone yogurts (Danone Group) … and Steggles Champion Breed More Meat Less Fat Chicken (Bartter Enterprises)” (249–50). In this single article, under closer examination of the text, one sees the ANF along with the major dairy companies and the nutrition expert at the \textit{AWW} have combined forces to covertly recommend specific brands of products.

\textbf{Reconciling antinomies of taste}

The examined advertisements bundle the paradoxical promise of novelty with tradition, care with convenience, health with indulgence and economy with extravagance. The paradoxes of the various advertisements and editorials, which Warde (1997) has termed the “antinomies of taste”, are clearly seen. However, we see the representations in the \textit{AWW} as moving beyond favouring the traditional over the novel or health over indulgence. The four antinomies of taste Warde describes are seen in the framing of the function of food and in the consumption of it in appropriate ways.

The tensions that exist between these antinomies are presented as a problem that is solved by the branded product in the problem-solution format so beloved to advertisers. In this we see the advertisers as understanding very well the existence of the antinomies, and further understanding the need to reconcile these polar concepts to make the product attractive to the consumer.

Often these tensions are presented simultaneously (as Warde suggests) which makes sorting out the conflicting information presented about these foods more difficult and actively contributes to consumer confusion. Thus it could be suggested that the creation of the tension in terms of the dichotomies of, say, indulgence and health is simultaneously created and resolved by the advertisement. The advertisement suggests a problem of indulgence and immediately offers the solution of health through their branded product. Thus we see the antinomies of taste in this socially constructed world of the magazine as being created for the purpose of and to provide a rationale for the “solution brand.” In this the building up of risk and anxiety and its resolution is entirely an exercise in representation.

\textbf{Convenience vs. care}

In a 1 August 1951 advertisement for Continental Chicken soup (51), this simultaneous presentation of antinomies can be seen. The advertisement has two “housewives” on opposite sides of the page with speech bubbles. One (Mrs. EM Crawley of Chatswood)
says “Imagine only 7 minutes to make,” while the other (Mrs. P. Breezwick of Ryde) says it “has that delicious homemade flavour!” This is an almost literal representation of Warde’s antinomie of care/convenience. The tension of the seven-minute convenience is allayed by the authentic “homemade” flavour as well as the symbolic value of the strong chicken soup often used as an ailment for colds, thereby entailing the notion of looking after oneself and actively caring to prevent any illness. In addition the endorsement by the American expert must be noted (Betty King of World Brands Pvt. Ltd.), as it is in keeping with the embracing of all things American in the post-war years. In the same issue is a recipe section entitled “Californian Style” which “included dishes which will be included in the gala dinners following the California Fiesta fashion parades in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide” (51).

**Indulgence vs. health**

This antinomy has many examples over the decades. The prevalent tension of the 1990s and 2000s is the problem of overindulgence and its attendant outcomes – obesity and disease. This tension needs to be resolved if the consuming society as we know it in late modernity is to continue. Thus the resolution is affected by the “lite,” the “cholesterol free,” the magic of margarine cholesterol spreads and the fat free, canola-containing processed foods. In the May 1991 issue (238–39), the Bird’s Eye No Cholesterol (cooked in polyunsaturated oil) Potato Fries advertisement says, “Now you can eat to your heart’s desire,” and goes on to say “As any nutritionist worth his salt will tell you, the humble potato can be extremely good for you, especially as Bird’s Eye are now cooking them in natural, polyunsaturated sunflower oil.” The fries are reconstituted processed potatoes deep-fried in sunflower oil, which may be not be GM free, and contain as many calories as ever, but they are cholesterol free – so indulge yourself and stay healthy.

While the recommendations to indulge are plentiful, the dominant message of self-regulation remains, and as Warde (1997) acknowledges, in a departure from his “structuralist” stand, the Foucauldian notion of shifting modes of control between the external and the internalized self-regulatory system exists. Thus the need is ever stronger to couch the advertisements in terms that appear not to upset the balance. Indulgence is not good unless it can be done without health repercussions – i.e. indulge in fries, but only if they are cholesterol free.

**Economy vs. extravagance**

This is nicely illustrated using the example of Ally’s Fancy Selected Pink Salmon (tinned) advertisement in 1981 (4 November, 62–63). The main headline is “Quick as a wink … Ally Pink.” The by-line says “Fish for 4 around $2,” and goes on, “Enough superb quality, high protein, delicious fish to satisfy 4 hungry people” “Fancy Selected Pink Salmon.” The ability to deliver the extravagance of pink salmon for lunch at $2 is offered as a means of resolving the housewife’s inherent tension between extravagance and the need to economize.

**Novelty vs. tradition**

Here the tensions that underlie the tug of traditional consumption and the newer ways of consuming are apparent in many examples of advertisements especially in the 1951
sample. Significant changes in the period of post-war prosperity have changed the food and meal rituals as well as what is eaten at different times of the day. This Kellogg’s Cornflakes advertisement from 27 January 1951 (48), shows the comparison and persuasive attempt to get people to move from a “cooked” traditional breakfast heavy in protein to the idea of ready-made cereal from a packet. The advertisement makes appeals at two levels – one is on economy, that this new kind of breakfast is cheaper. It suggests that consumers “make the cost comparison,” “it is equal in energy to three eggs, two big helpings of lamb’s fry or three fish.” Thus the novelty is equated to the traditional and favourable comparisons are made to have consumers reconcile this tension (it does not compromise on energy – same as the traditional breakfast!). In addition it brings in science, with the “food experts” depicted in a little picture of a man with serious looking glasses and the statement that: “Food experts say one plate of Kelloggs Cornflakes with milk and sugar and fresh fruit and bread and butter (on toast) gives you one third of your daily food needs.”

These examples throw into focus the specific ways in which AWW has been able to offer the consumer reader “solutions” to the “complexities and contradictions” (Martens and Scott 2005, 394) of the late capitalist society.

Conclusion

In this analysis we have tried to show using socio-historical methods the way health foods have been socially constructed over the decades. We present data which are much in line with Warde’s argument for the antinomies of taste in advertising, as playing out in a contradictory manner with care/tradition/economy/health always weighed more heavily – e.g., “it is convenient but is as good as if time and labour (care) was lavished on it” (see his example of the Stork ready rolled pastry [1997, 131]). However, we interpret this rather differently. The inherent contradictions of these antinomies are in the first instance offered by the advertisers themselves and then resolved in the advertisement expressly to serve up their branded product as the solution. This then is how the market uses the state of “gastro-anomy” or a condition of “no rules” in food preparation and consumption that Fischler refers to:

Food selection and intake are increasingly a matter of individual, not social decisions, and they are no longer under ecological or seasonal constraints. But individuals lack reliable criteria to make these decisions and therefore they experience a growing sense of anxiety. (1980, 948)

What we suggest is that such a gastro-anomy needs to be filled and that the food industry in conjunction with the nutritionists and other “experts” attempt to fill this “collapse of normative regulation” (Warde 1997, 31). Ultimately, as Bauman (1988) observes, organizations and occupations such as nutrition, medicine, alternative therapy, the food industry and the advertising industry offer the advice that in the past was regulated by social institutions embedded in the regional cultural fabric. They attempt to allay anxiety and offer solutions, mostly in the form of self-regulatory practices – “eating lite and fat-free.”

Thus the DMN fills the gap in this gastro-anomy. The DMN creates and fulfils the consumer’s need for normative regulation in food consumption. However, while this may be in the natural order of things (new codes taking the place of old), one needs to question the interrelatedness of these institutions and their interests when it comes to providing a regime of consumption. The building up of risk and anxiety in food
consumption, as well as the solutions that are all offered by the same nexus of groups, then must lead us to critically examine the nature of their interests in maintaining such a state of anxiety. In providing the information and “science” that informs the consumers and claims to “empower” them to then make the right choice, one sees the consumer’s participation in this nexus. In internalizing the advice of these institutions on how to eat and keep healthy, the self-discipline of the consumer adds to the domination of the nexus in a consumer space where little truly “independent” advice is available.

Acknowledgements

Greg Patmore served as editor on this article. The authors wish to thank the reviewers for their very constructive comments.

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