The health-food crusade and the super-food saint: a creative exploration of the discourse of healthy eating, morality, and the body.

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ABSTRACT

In our increasingly secular society, the value of health is rising. Moral values that used to be dominated by religion are now a matter of health. In many ways the church has been replaced by the gymnasium. Due to the rising pressure to be healthy, new problems have arisen about what to eat and how to eat. Health-food marketing uses a moral language suggesting that having a healthy body is a choice available to everyone and one that should be made by the 'good.' This is evident in qualitative research, in which the discourse of food risk was associated with feelings of "blame" and "moral judgements" of other people's diet.

My research employs the arts as a means of investigating and critiquing some of these claims. I have produced 10 creative pieces—photographs, painting, video and poetry— to examine the impact of the health-food crusade from new perspectives.

METHODS

I investigated the moral discourse of the health food industry using an observational approach looking at data from blogs and health-food marketing. I then conducted written interviews and a focus group with 12 participants. Using discussions and activities, I explored themes on diet, morality and language.

I used these findings to inform my creative work. These pieces were each based on a word commonly seen within food marketing such as “purity” or “detox.” These are the words in brackets under the images of my work. I use humour and religious imagery as a means to reflect on the exaggerated and moral claims within health-food trends. Collectively, the pieces act together to expose some of the moral themes in our pursuit to eat well.

BACKGROUND

The discourse surrounding health-foods reflects a wider preoccupation with health. This stems largely from political and cultural change in the 1970's which saw health move from a right to a personal responsibility.

These political, social and cultural changes along with the rising interest in the nutritionist movement has created a moral dimension in the discourse of healthy eating. This is particularly evident in health-food marketing and literature today.

This literature is expanding and using new ways to communicate information; blogs, online video tutorial and phone apps are some of these new technologies contributing to the “commercialization of health.” Analysing data from social media has been neglected in previous research.

The moral language of food has dangerous connotations. Mental wellbeing is jeopardised by feelings of guilt and stigma induced by the weight-loss industry, and trends such as “yo-yo dieting” harm our physical health. Our moral and social wellbeing is at risk too; the rising concern about what we eat has created a growing anxiety about food and our bodies.

Data from qualitative research supports these observations. Delaney and McCarthy in their investigation of the moral language of food found that many of the participants felt guilty about what they ate. Good foods—those which are healthy—could be enjoyed legitimately, whereas the pleasure from bad foods were seen as morally wrong.

I want to show how the modern discourse of healthy eating has become a new “threat to health” through social and cultural  atrogenesis following arguments put forward by critics of modernity such as Ivan Illich.

RESULTS

Health-food literature and marketing is riddled with moral language promoting superior lifestyles exclusively available to the saintly classes. My focus group and interviews revealed how many people had "converted" to new diets because of feelings of guilt relating to their health. For example, one participant had purchased some superfood spirulina after hearing of its health benefits. Most participants felt strongly that healthy eating was their responsibility.

This poster displays some examples of my creative pieces inspired by my research. I explore some of the moral, cultural and social dimensions to the language of health-food marketing. The words are used in different ways: some take the literal meaning of the word as the inspiration for the creative piece, others use a more abstracted meaning to raise new perspectives about the words.

DISCUSSION

A new, problematic relationship has emerged between risk, control and pleasure; the discourse of healthy eating is both moralised and medicalised.

This research does not wish to discourage people from eating a healthier diet. However, I have shown that our choice to eat well is limited by the modern discourse. For example, marketing often misleads consumers about the healthfulness of a product.

Through my creative pieces, I aim to raise awareness of the dangers of the health-food crusade and how modern food marketing becomes distorted by moral and cultural values.

References:


“I’ve got some spirulina in my cupboard” – Focus group participant

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