

Favourite Cookbooks: **Social and Individual Identity Work** Tonner A

Introduction

Many consumers can look at their kitchen shelves and see it groaning under the weight of an array of different cookbooks, some remain unopened and unused while others become well worn and well loved. What distinguishes these books how do we arrive at favourites when so many others languish untouched? This article argues that the influences which guide choices of favourite cookbook and cookery writer stem from the individual's narrative of self and by extension their narrative as cook. In the sociology of consumption the role of self and identity is a recurring one, particularly among those who view consumption as an act of integration between external objects and self, often through a process of personalisation (Belk, 1988). Whether food consumption can take on such significance is well debated: Warde (1997), for example, argues that because we can travel the world nightly in our food choices: Chinese takeout one night, Pizza the next and a home cooked meal the third, individual meals are not significant enough consumption experiences to tell us much about the self-identity of the consumer; Somers (1994) argues contrary, that every consumption decision no matter how low cost or habitual forms part of an individual's identity work, Belk et al (2003) discuss how food, among many other subjects of consumption, can be important enough for consumers to become passionate about it and Mennell (1985) discusses how food can illuminate, not just individual identity, but can provide broad cultural information. That debate will continue beyond this article so for this purpose it considers that, whatever the view on individual foodstuffs or meals, cook books in common with other forms of literature can become well used and take on increased symbolism for their owners (Brownlee & Hewer, 2007).

Cookbooks have a heterogeneity of style from the instructional owner manual style of Larousse through to the lifestyle led work of Jamie Oliver and Nigel Slater so that they can embody not only representations of contemporary culinary culture but also extend far beyond the kitchen to create aspirational cultural narratives. This paper uses narrative analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews to explore the narrative construction of self, attitudes towards food and cooking and how this becomes outwardly manifest through choices of cookbook. It presents these findings first by exploring the cultural norms which constrain the consumption practices before discussing the individual level narratives in the form of three case studies which, while not generalisation or typographies, do demonstrate some of the range of the identity uncovered in the research and allow an exploration of the consistency and coherence which the individual narratives have from self through to cookbook.

Defining Identity

In discussing identity this paper works within the tradition of identity as narrative. Berger & Luckmann (1967) discuss identity as a uniquely modern problem. In pre-modern society psychological identity coincided with forensic identity "A knight is a knight and a peasant is a peasant. There is, therefore, no problem of identity." Giddens (1991) however suggests that modernity, which he defines as the breaking of old moulds and the instigation of new ones, begins from an acceptance of consciousness "that to be a human being is to know, virtually all of the time in terms of some description or another both what one is doing and why one is doing it". He argues that self-identity is not a personality trait possessed by a individual but rather that "the self is reflexively understood by a person in terms of her or his biography"

This concept of identity as biography considers that while identity is enduring throughout life, the narrative changes over time and until death is incomplete, like an unwritten autobiography it has a continuity evolving but at any point in its reading it is unique and that which distinguishes a person from all others. Giddens's (1991:54) argues that a "person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going." He also argues that this identity must have some objectivity because "to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world it cannot be wholly fictive". Snygg & Combs (1949) suggest that like a book editor identity creation is a selective undertaking, not every action or attitude is included in the self-narrative rather the individual edits based upon those aspects which are vital or truly important to that person. This rather post-modern view of identity suggests that rather than every action necessarily building to a coherent, predefined view of identity the consumer can be free to experiment, in a seemingly schizophrenic way, with their identity work since only that with enduring meaning becomes part of the narrative (Oyserman, 2004).

Rosenberg (1979:7) suggests that identity can be explored more deeply by looking at self concept which he defines as "the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object." Self concept goes beyond an overall objective narrative and begins to unpick and categorise the many stories individuals construct about themselves: so it becomes as Sirgy (1982) discusses not a flat story but multi-dimensional. That behaviour is not only influenced by past and current experiences but by the personal meanings each individual attaches to their perception of those experiences (Wylie, 1961). Sirgy (1979) unpicks the idea that a person has one personal identity and instead argues that there are a range of self-images dependent upon situation. He argues for four different constructions: actual self-image, ideal self image, social self image and ideal social self-image.

Cantor et al (1986) also discuss negative self-image, the self as a dynamic structure which involves a multiplicity of selves and necessarily not all will be wholly positive and that negative self-image can be that identity which one would rather keep hidden or which can be as Abrams & Hogg (1999) discuss a way of individuals identifying behaviour or identity which they wish to avoid and so actively seek to act contrary to it. In discussing how consumers use reference groups to identify and differentiate themselves from others Cova et al (2007) discuss how this becomes tribal where those within the group are treated with a halo effect where all their views become more persuasive while those on the outside are considered other and have identity or views to be avoided. This social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggest argues that identity cannot be considered as wholly solipsistic, that there is a socionormative influence upon identity: so only by comparison with significant others; membership of social groups; and categories can individuals self-define their own identity as Abrams & Hogg (1999) discuss identity is as much distinguishing from what one is not as defining what one is.

In this research it is impossible to pinpoint whether the idealised or actual self image is being discussed in the respondents narratives indeed it is likely that it is a combination of both.

Consumption as identity work.

Identity and consumption have long been linked by researchers such as Veblen (1899) who initially discussed the concept of conspicuous consumption, those outward displays of status and style, communicating ideal social self-image. McCracken (1988: 136) suggests that "through the

goods which we consume we may be communicating with ourselves” no matter how consciously that communication is undertaken. Bauman (1988: 63) argues that the relationship between consumption and identity and the increasing need for self identity is as a result of growing individualism in society, that the “rapidly expanding, seemingly limitless, world of consumption” is “the place where freedom and certainty are offered and obtained together” and “the harrowing task of constructing one’s own social identity” can be made real by “making the necessary purchases”.

This relationship between self-image and purchase behaviour has been researched by Birdwell (1968) & Grubb & Hupp (1968) who conclude that consumer’s match product image with self-image. Jackson & Holbrook (1995) argue that the way people use goods is complex and that they “transform their (the goods’) meaning as they incorporate them into their lives.” Belk (1988) argues that we regard our possessions as part of ourselves, that the distinction between me and mine is difficult for individuals. Barnet & Cavanagh (1994) argue that virtually every purchase decision however minor is part of the narrative of our self identity.

Food & Identity Creation.

As highlighted already in this article debate rages over the role of food in identity creation but the author follows the work of Fischler (1988, 275) who and others who argue that “food is central to our sense of identity” and that by crossing the border from outside to inside it touches upon the very nature of a person. Valentine (1999) suggests that the role of food in individual identity formation is underexplored and that there is a misplaced notion of family and cultural homogeneity when it comes to research in identity through food (Campbell, 1995). Her study of vegetarianism counters this notion by considering that food choice can be very individual: when a teenage daughter made a decision to become a vegetarian it effected the identities of the family differently: the other daughter & father partially located within the vegetarian narrative but mum firmly identifying herself as a meat-eater. For one member of this family the rejection of meat is a positive symbol of “individuality and rebellion” (Gabriel & Lang, 1995) however the same consumption practice does not have universal or homogeneous meaning in terms of individual identity creation. Bauman (2000) in discussing consumption argues that it is “endemically and irredeemably lonely even at such moments as it is conducted in company with others” because the meaning of the individual interpretation of a shared consumption will vary depending on individual identity narrative. So it is only by considering the identity narratives of respondents in conjunction with their consumption stories that real meaning can be discovered. Short (2007) discusses how individual’ perception of their cooking skills is also key to identity domestic cooks focus more on their ability to improvise, use up leftovers and prepare meals which meet a range of tastes as the important parts of cooking leaving the work of creating a perfect custard or filleting a fish to the professional chef, cooking identity however she contends is not a shared, collective group image rather each has a personal approach based on skill and attitudes.

Cookbook as Cultural Artifacts.

Cookbooks are by their nature heterogeneous: there are some used by consumers as reference materials with basic cooking techniques or classic recipes; specialised texts dealing with cooking for children or vegetarianism whose importance shifts depending on lifestyle and life stage; the hand written journals passed through generations uncovering family and social history and ubiquitously the celebrity cookbook like a the Blockbuster movie which spawns a range of action

figures so celebrity chefs use their books as the money-maker communicator of their ideology. Cookbooks have been recognised to have a cultural significance: Mennell (1985), among others, discusses how cookbooks should be considered historical archive which illuminate domestic history and Tobias (1998) goes further to suggest they extend beyond the domestic to give clues to wider social history. Brownlee, Hewer & Horne (2005:7) discuss cookbooks as cultural artefacts which contain “inscribed cultural tales which can be understood as productive of the culinary culture that they pretend only to display” so they argue when Nigella Lawson talks about “Slow-cook weekend” or “Rainy days” she is not just reflecting ways of cooking rather she is creating a “stylised aspirational representation of culinary culture”. Grossberg (1992) helps us understand why so many of the cookbooks we buy remain unused when he identifies the concept of hyper-consumerism, where the object of consumption is overshadowed by the immense pleasure felt by the act of consuming and Adema (2000) suggests this maybe the case in the buying and reading of books where that act becomes more pleasurable than actual cooking or eating. So to have the books on the shelf to read from time to time or to watch cooking shows on TV does not necessarily lead to wanting to cook the meals there is pleasure in having them for their own sake. Short (2006) argues that this interest in watching others cook is being blamed for a lack of cooking skill but without any definition of what is meant by being able to cook, cooking she argues evades complete definition and that those who use pre-prepared ingredients do not necessarily consider themselves to be bereft of skill simply not they are not always engaged in cooking from scratch but they still prepare meals.

Methodology

This research is an interpretivist analysis of everyday consumption practice it is, as Kirchberg (2007) discusses, a study of *Homo Economicus*; considering the consumer as an individual who has agency to create his own identity and freedom to consume unconstrained. It considers that narrative analysis is a key way of exploring self understanding through narrative structuring and the role of storytelling (Thompson, 1997: 440). That narrative analysis can uncover the ‘personalised cultural meanings that constitute a person’s sense of self and the biographical significance of specific life events and experiences’. Thompson (1997) argues that a hermeneutic model can be constructed by considering the person as the text within which individual event narratives such as cooking experience can be contextualised. He argues that this must be seen in the context of the social norms which the individual operates within: so the *Homo Sociologicus* who recognises himself as having social identity carrying roles and expectations is also analysed (Kirchberg, 2007). Thompson’s (1997) model is followed in this work so that social influences on cookbooks and cooking are considered as well as the individuals’ self-identity narrative, cooking identity and individual cookbook choice event narratives and all synthesised for meaning.

The data source of this article is a qualitative enquiry comprising semi-structured depth interviews, lasting between one and two hours, conducted with 20 thirty-something men and women: all of whom had tertiary level education and were in full or part-time employment, were responsible for the household cooking and had no diagnosed eating disorders. The discussions covered a broad range of food related issues including food shopping habits and knowledge and understanding of celebrity chefs. Narrative analysis of the transcribed interviews was the undertaken exploring consumer relationships with celebrity chefs, cookbooks with specific attention to how they created a consistent relationship in their identity narrative. These have then been structured around the

Findings

The findings of this research are organised around the macro influences and micro narrative which work together to create the

The social elements of cooking and cookbooks

In considering shared taste Warde (1997) discusses a hierarchy which begins with direct family influence, works through cultural impact to broad social norms. This current study is clearly socially situated, the respondents are of a single generation, their current social situations are relatively homogeneous as well educated, relatively affluent couples and young families. In terms of the impact of this in setting a structure within which meaning should be interpreted two findings are highlighted: Cookbooks are culturally and generationally bound; and individual cooking skill and identity is recognised as being a product of family influence within the social norms of the 1970s and 80s.

Cookbooks are culturally bound.

When discussing cookbooks it was interesting to see that the respondents seemed bound by two factors first that this is a British sample and cookbooks do not seem to be truly international. The chefs discussed were largely homegrown British talent: Nigella Lawson, Gordon Ramsay and Jamie Oliver among others, with some reference back to European cooking traditions through books such as the French Larousse Gastronomique and the Italian Silver Spoon. This means that some of the cookbooks that a US audience would find ubiquitous such as those by Martha Stewart, Emeril Lagasse or Rachel Ray or the Australian Donna Hay are not in broad publication in the UK market and so are not mentioned by the sample. In reading the narratives those with different geographic and cultural backgrounds may think immediately of their local celebrity chefs rather than those identified by the respondents as their own cultural norms shape understanding.

Cookbooks and celebrity chefs also appear to have an element of fashion so in discussion with colleagues of a slightly older generation, about this work, some have expressed surprise that writers such as Elizabeth David or Mrs Beeton do not merit discussion. These writers much utilised by older generations are not on the radar of those in their early thirties, that is not to say they may not own books by these author but they are not identified as particularly influential or well loved items. It is the contemporaneous books and authors who merit most attention since food is considered to change over time so the over-worked food and formal dinner parties of the 1980s are no longer considered desirable. So Anne, 30 discusses:

‘I hate the idea of everyone sitting waiting in the front room with sherry I’d rather they were all here in the kitchen talking to me as I cook, cooking is as sociable as eating, maybe even more so, I wouldn’t want people to think dinner here was anything formal.’

This trend for informality means that there is no real looking back to previous generations for books because these are likely to be a reflection of more formal ways of eating.

Identity is recognised as socially constructed.

In discussing both overall identity and their identity as cooks the respondents rejected the idea that they were similar to their friends or that they looked to those around them for influence rather the influence of family was recognised as being important. This influence, as Festinger (1954) noted, can be either a positive effect of role modelling or negative effect of rebellion and respondents identified elements of both in their narrative. Michael, 33 identifies his parents as strong role

models upon his adult identity.

‘I think that they (parents) strongly defined themselves by their place in the time of the 60’s that they got to go to university when no one else in my family had done so. So when we were growing up it was important to our parents that we did the best we could, it didn’t matter what we did as long as we tried. It was important to them that we discussed and debated things, politics or whatever, they were very liberal’

His own identity therefore becomes heavily embedded within his abilities as a communicator, being able to simplify complex ideas and persuade people to his viewpoint.

Celine, 32 also identifies this role modelling in her discussion of her cooking identity:

‘I learned to cook from my mother definitely, I’d say she’s like me in her love of good food but 10 times more so. She’s pretty obsessive about cooking and food and growing her own veg for example. From a really young age I was in the kitchen with my mum usually with sort of shitty jobs like peeling potatoes but learning already how to do that properly, from probably the age of about 7 or 8 I think, and just watching her do things.

So in discussing her own identity as a cook Celine emphasises her ability to do things properly from, what she identifies as the complex, such as making mayonnaise or meringue to simple things like the perfect bacon sandwich.

There are also clear narratives of rebellion particularly in the how the respondents viewed themselves as cooks. There was a recurring narrative among a number of the respondents that growing up in the 1970s and 80s their Mother’s were working and food as a result was not particularly important. Jill, 35 outlines how this has shaped her own attitudes towards cooking.

‘my mum was never particularly interested, whether that was a time thing or whether she just didn’t like it, but she was never an interested cook. She’s a very plain fayre type person and she’d always make things like stew and mince and potatoes and I always hated it, always absolutely hated it. So now I try to make meals a bit more interesting and fresher I’d hate my kids to say their mum was a rubbish cook.’

This desire to cook better food than their parents was recurring, suggesting that cooking creatively has become an important factor in determining good food.

While this work shows evidence of direct family influence over identity and particularly cooking identity it is also indicative of the social importance of cooking being increasing across the generations. This is in keeping with Short’s (2007) work which suggests that, among some demographic groups such as the middle class, fear that cooking skill has been lost maybe overstated since a new passion for cooking is evident among this group. They may have largely missed out on recipes being handed down from generation to generation through their family but this has ignited in them a desire to find their own way and build their own cooking skill and legacy.

Coherence of identity narrative

Turning attention now to the homo economicus narratives of respondents. In discussing how consumers construct an identity both widely and within a cooking context and how this translates through to cookbook choice the most useful format is to present a number of case studies. These are not typographies of identity or of consumption but are intended to demonstrate something of the consistency and coherence of their narrative. Three examples are outlined which highlight the

different focus food has within overall identity and the cook book choices which result: cooking identity as central to construction of overall identity; food as an outward expression of overall identity and food identity being restricted by overall identity.

Cooking identity: central to overall identity.

Michael is 33 and has a passion for cooking, so much so that the ability to cook has become central to his identity as an adult. He describes his philosophy as 'doing yourself justice' and while this attitude is embedded within his attitude to food it has become more than that impacting on how he sees himself in more general terms. He describes his attitude to food as:

'I don't tend to make anything sort of exotic, a lot of people, they take a pride in the fact that they can make a curry or something but I've never really bothered my arse about any of that. The ability to cook is important. Cooking for me is about taking responsibility and being an adult. That Nigel Slater thing about doing yourself justice, just because you don't have long to make something or just because you can spend a lot of money on it doesn't necessarily mean that you have to have something tasteless.'

Michael's identity as a cook is particularly well defined among the sample it is an attitude which he typifies as not overworking food or making too much fuss or effort, but of being pragmatic recognising your individual skill level and limitations and just doing the simple things well.

Michael utilised food writer Nigel Slater as being the advocate or representative of this approach to cooking. He recognises that he is not alone in being attracted to this way of thinking about food and discusses it as a food movement.

'I like him (Nigel Slater) and his approach to that (food) and I suppose lots of people have cottoned on to that and now he's quite instrumental in that whole movement of just eat something simple but you know make it a good ingredient'

Like all of the respondent Michael owns many cookbooks and he discusses the pleasure of just spending time reading them but he has developed a particular affinity with Nigel Slater, not simply because of the recipes in his books but because he has engaged with the culinary culture he advocates.

'Some books have been quite influential on me in terms of the way I try to eat and I will go back to them time and again. I think Nigel Slater, not only in terms of things that I have tried to make, that I would never have had any idea how to and because of that person I then could, but I kind of go back to them because I kind of feel they've given me something. It's the whole thing off not just regarding making good food as being a thing for occasions but kind of thinking about what you eat as being good even if it's a half an hour in the evening on a weeknight you know that sort of thing that came from Nigel Slater.'

Michael's view is that this way of thinking about food is clear and distinctive and something he has been conscious of trying to follow since leaving home and becoming a responsible adult and he talks about how 'doing yourself justice' has become a way in which he thinks of life more broadly. In his working life he operates within a relatively specialised technical environment though his role is more general, as an overall manager he is required to have strong social skills and he discusses his attitude towards these issues as being about recognising his own strengths and focussing his attention there without worrying too much about the areas he's not so strong.

'what I do is about relationships about trying to persuade and influence, I suppose, rather than anything technical. Trying to you know articulate ideas that may not be easy to

understand in an understandable way. I like that I'm loquacious generally, I like words and to be in discussion'

'I'm not particularly good on technical things, so in terms of my own work being able to expend energy and devote time to understanding things I don't find that interesting. I don't think I've got very much patience when it comes to that kind of thing.'

Just like he considered it important to do the best with the cooking ingredients and skill he has have without worrying about his limitations so his work identity is about taking his strength as communicator and focussing upon making the best of that without worrying about his limitations in technical matters.

Food: outward expression of overall identity

Within his profession Sean, 34 has risen quickly through the ranks: as a bit of a rising star. He spends a lot of time at work and likes to make an impression to be remembered and well regarded. Achieving beyond his peers, winning and being able to show-off and be rewarded for effort is important to his feeling positive about himself.

'What I do is all about getting people to trust that you know best so I suppose I do show off a bit, only cause I find I usually know more than anyone else so it's quite easy to. It's also important to dress smart at work cause it makes you feel more professional and it effects the way people treat you they think you're better at your job.'

The outward demonstrations of his success are an important part of his identity in the clothes that he wears, the car he drives and where he lives, conspicuous consumption is part of the rewards of his hard work. Sean has taken his desire to be the best among his peers through to his attitude to cooking and learning to cook: stretching himself to become skilled in technique from his earliest endeavours.

'I would describe myself as quite a good cook I could hold my own against most people. I bought this book and learn how to make a proper Boeuf Bourguignon and that was the first dish I would say I sort of taught myself how to cook and which I now make it entirely differently and then I just sort of went on from there. I would say the rate at which I'm learning to cook new things is increasing with time. I think it's one of those things where when you learn how to do new things you just want to do more I think you learn more by stretching yourself'

As a result Sean does not necessarily cook everyday, his wife takes most of the burden for the family's weekly meals, but he does like an excuse to show off his talents from time to time and the cookbooks of award winning chefs and restaurateurs meet his needs.

'I like to have people round of dinner and that's when I usually cook. It's that fairly clichéd thing about liking any idea of making something fairly complicated and impressive and then for the other four nights out of five actually been quite happy to allow a woman to do all the cooking in a fairly unnoticeable way that just happens magically and the kitchen remains clean. I do see myself as bit of an occasion cook, you know, I like time on the weekend to spend all day shopping for good stuff and I like Gordon Ramsay cause its classic but it teaches you new ways and once you know that's it and it's always dead impressive.'

For Sean's identity, working hard and being rewarded are closely linked, so expending effort to prepare a meal would be pointless if there is no-one to enjoy the results and to be impressed, an impressive result is as important as the process of learning the skills as such its important that the

cookbook he uses combines both aspects. By focussing on professional chefs of some renown for his inspiration he is confident that he stretches his own ability and that his results are better than his peers could produce.

Food: restricted by overall identity.

The final case study is that of Pamela, 32 who sees her worry as a big part of who she is all sort of external issues impact upon her from the macro level of world deprivation to the micro of worrying how she's seen by her friends and partner. She recognises that this element of her identity impacts upon the choices she makes and that it has limited her horizons.

'I worry about big issues but also small issues you. I'll panic over the smallest things I've not quite got an ulcer yet but I've got the worst heartburn you could ever imagine and I'm popping Zantac like smarties. I worry about the world, I think is a big part of it: the world, deprivation, guilt about the deprivation. But then I panic about what if my car falls of the bridge when I'm trying to get onto the motorway, I didn't drive for about 5 years and I still only do cause I work so far away but I never get any happier about it. I worry about what other people think of me a lot too, do they like me, do they think I'm any good at what I do, that sort of thing'

Pamela is a longterm vegetarian, while this article accepts that there are many reasons for such a dietary and lifestyle choice, Pamela's is firmly grounded in her worries and is a function of the restriction that worry has upon her life.

'I gave up drinking milk and eating meat during Chernobyl cause I was sure it was going to poison me. I worry now about pesticides and things in vegetables but I can't give up eating all together.'

This has resulted in Pamela being a vegetarian who doesn't really enjoy the taste of vegetables and so who relies upon carbohydrates like bread and potato, fat in the form of cheese and meat substitutes to sustain her. Perhaps as a result of this Pamela of all the group is not particularly interested in cooking, she recognises it as a necessity, but tends to stick to tried and tested favourite dishes.

'If it's just me I have a lot of pasta or potatoes and cheese it's not so healthy but there's lots of vegetables I don't really like.'

This restricted choice which Pamela discusses extends to her cookbook choice which she utilises only when she is cooking for others. Most cookbooks contain too many dishes which contain meat or fish and so are not of particular interest to Pamela so she restricts her repertoire to specialist vegetarian books.

'I don't have a lot of cookbooks cause there's not much point but I come back to Rose Elliot a lot especially if I'm cooking for other people who're not that chuffed they'll be eating vegetarian food in the first place, I know they're not looking forward to it so I at least try to make something a bit tasty'

Her method of cooking and using these cookbooks is also rather restricted, she sticks closely to recipes, feeling uncomfortable in substituting ingredients or simplifying because she worries it will go wrong and her guests will leave disappointed.

Conclusion

While cooking may be a daily necessity, this does not prevent it from being heavy with individual and social meaning. Cookbooks may clutter kitchen shelves largely untouched across the globe but there will amongst the dusty many be the few which really have an impact upon cooking

attitudes. Cookbooks like fiction will move on and off the bestseller lists and so each new generation's influences will be limited to some extent by the contemporary and the new. Within this small sample of the thirty-something generation there is evidence of a compelling interest in cooking which they don't necessarily identify as being present in their parents, this gives hope that cooking skill is not being lost forever. Food is considered by this group of respondents as being important and the narratives of identity which they present, however idealised they may be, recognise cooking as being more than a chore and food, in the domestic setting, as having the ability to say something about its preparer. In analysing the broad identity narratives and food consumption episodes this research found a high level of high consistency and coherence between respondents sense of self, their cooking and food attitudes and their discussion of the books they chose to buy. In impact this research is useful in distinguishing between the practice of buying lots of cookbooks, having them on the shelf and engaging in hyper consumption by enjoying reading them without ever cooking a dish and the more lasting relationships that can build between cookery writer and consumer when their culinary ideology or cultural outlook strike a chord. There has long been debate in consumption theory whether food is a significant enough item to really have identity meaning, this research suggests that narratives of food consumption and daily cooking can be meaningful. Even if the accounts themselves are a little idealised, in their telling consumers are engaged in identity work demonstrating coherence across a range of aspects in their identity. While, they may in real life cook in a variety different ways or enjoy multitudinous types of cooking, they have undertaken Snygg & Combs (1949) self editing and constructed food and cookbook narratives consistent with their overall self-image.

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