Conceptualising Representations of Kitchens in Lifestyle Magazines: Aspirational Entertainment or Familial Love?

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Abstract:
Goods are crucial in the establishment and maintenance of relationships, and consumption is shaped largely through social interactions with others. Theoretical conceptualizations of the kitchen reflect this basic assumption about the role of goods and thus centre around the kitchen as a ‘place of sociability’. This paper addresses the social relations of the kitchen as portrayed in interior design magazines. The representations of kitchens in lifestyle magazines centre around two models of social experience – one which poses the ideal lifestyle as revolving around entertaining friends and the other that presents the ideal of the family. These two models of social interaction largely correspond with two different aesthetics of kitchen consumerism. The first centres around the kitchen as a site of aspirational consumption. The kitchen designed for ‘entertaining’ is presented as the showpiece of home that signifies social distinction and good taste. Signs of gender, domesticity and the chaos of everyday life are noticeably absent. The second dominant kitchen aesthetic centres around the kitchen as a site where ‘domestic enactments of the family can be undertaken’. These representations are tied together in the fact that lifestyle magazines propose kitchen consumerism as a panacea to the problems of conducting fulfilling personal relationships.
There is… a basic conflict between the desire to express individual style, taste and personal and social status through the home, and a desire to maintain the home as a space that is comfortable and relaxing, and where authentic, genuine personal values can be fostered (Woodward 2003: 394-5).

Introduction

Australian lifestyle magazines such as Kitchen Trends, Kitchen and Bathrooms Quarterly and Country Kitchen Ideas devote themselves to encouraging consumption of new kitchens. In doing so, the kitchen as a “place of sociability” is the theme that is exploited most fully, the magazines depicting the consumption of kitchens as a means by which to successfully conduct social relations with others (Corrigan 1997: 109-110). In this paper, I address the way in which representations of kitchens in three magazines articulate the nature of social relations in the home. Furthermore, I examine the ways in which these imagined social relations articulate public and private concerns.

Representations of kitchens in these three magazines centre around two models of social experience – one that poses the ideal lifestyle as revolving around entertaining, and the other emphasising family-centred ideals and values. These two models of social interaction largely correspond with two different aesthetics of kitchen consumerism – the first emphasises style, contemporary modes of design and the signification of prestige, the second privileges comfort, intimacy and an emphasis upon the family. Thus I argue that a broad binary is constructed in lifestyle magazines between two ideal types of kitchens: the ‘modern’ kitchen and the ‘country’ kitchen. The modern kitchen embodies public concerns – the kitchen as showpiece, as art and as a symbol of social status. Representations of the country kitchen provide a counter-narrative, presenting the kitchen as the arena for performances of domesticity and familial relationships.

Aims

This paper aims to look at the kitchen as a space that articulates the ways in which kitchens embody social distinctions and familial relationships. Conventionally, analyses of kitchens look to gender relations as an organizing principle of social relations concerning the kitchen. This paper is not concerned with gender and the specific role of women in the kitchens as represented in the magazines I am analysing.
The potential of kitchens to express social identities and the relationships that govern and mediate them are exploited in these magazines to market new kitchens as a means to facilitate successful social relationships. I argue that the social relationships presented on the pages of the magazines express public and private social identities. As a visible central point of the home for both family members and visitors, the kitchen has the potential to encompass both public and private concerns according to context (Southerton 2001: 183). I will use ‘public’ social identities to refer to social relationships that articulate notions of class and social status, and ‘private’ social identities to point to the home as the arena for familial social relations. For instance, when entertaining visitors, the kitchen often stands as a signifier of status, whilst in everyday domestic interactions the kitchen reigns as an expression of familial relationships. I will identify how these concerns are reflected in the representations of kitchens in lifestyle magazines. But first, the question needs to be asked – what motivates people to outlay money on new kitchens?

**Theory**

The academic literature that addresses domestic consumption patterns take two broad arguments in regards to consumer motivations. One broad approach assumes that consumption patterns are motivated by the desire to express social status (Bourdieu 1984; Hamilton & Denniss 2005). The other approach privileges the primacy of intimate familial relations (Miller 1998; McCracken 2005).

The home presents ‘the stage on which all the various domestic enactments of self and family can be undertaken’ (McCracken 2005: 39). Within the home, the kitchen can be conceptualised as a particularly important site in which domestic social interactions and expressions of identities take place. The kitchen presents homeowners with a site conducive to the expression of the role and significance of the family, presenting a canvas upon which aesthetics, social values and moralities can be expressed (Freeman 2004: 6-7). The home has the potential to signify individual taste and style, as well as holding the potential to express familial and broader social relations (Woodward 2001: 121). Consumption takes on a collective character as the home stands as the ‘symbolic body for the family’ that indicates group status and membership (Belk 1988: 152). Domestic consumption practices are thus marked by a tension between the desire to express individuality and the need to take account of collective social identities such as class, social status and family.
Consumption has been conceptualised as a means by which to establish, maintain and reproduce social relationships – particularly with regards to the expression of collective social identities such as class, community and family (Douglas & Isherwood 1979; Bourdieu 1984; Miller 1998). The academic literature on consumption within the domestic sphere concerns itself with the tension between the expression of public and private identities through consumption for the home (Miller 1998; Reimer & Leslie 2004; Woodward 2003; McCracken 2005).

Bourdieu’s ideas in *Distinction*, posits ‘consumption practices are symbolic of the resources available to individuals and act to re-produce the existing social order’ (Southerton 2001: 185). In Bourdieu’s view, ways of consuming are directly related to levels of social, cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu 1984; Southerton 2001: 185). Bourdieu’s work is thus concerned with the expression of public identities through consumption – namely those of class and social status.

McCracken’s (2005: 23, 25) account of ‘homeyness’ as a ‘material culture’ draws a counter-narrative to Bourdieu’s arguments by focusing upon the ways in which consumption practices can articulate the primacy of private familial interactions over the public concerns of class and status. Expressions of ‘homeyness’ are posited by McCracken (2005: 39) as a defence strategy against trends expressing social status through domestic consumption. Consumption patterns that emphasise the idea of ‘home’ with its connotations of intimacy and comfort, are grounded on attaching personal, rather than market dictated, meanings on consumer objects (McCracken 2005: 43).

Woodward’s (2003) arguments are particularly useful in mediating these two positions, as he directly addresses the tensions evident in middle-class domestic consumption. Woodward argues that an inherent ‘conflict’ exists between the expression of individual taste and status through aspirational domestic interiors and the need to establish and maintain the home as a space where intimate domestic relations can take place (2003: 394-5).

**Method**

The interior design magazines that comprise the sample for this research illustrate the spectrum of options available for consumers who are imagining or undertaking kitchen renovations. The sample comprises of 8 magazines: *Kitchen Trends* (22[2]),
Findings

An analysis of representations of in these magazines will illustrate the ways in which interior design magazines construct ideal constellations of aesthetics, commodities and social relationships that inform the ways in which new kitchens are perceived by the consumers of these magazines. The kitchens depicted on the pages of the magazines fall into two broad categories – that of the modern kitchen and the country kitchen.

i. The Modern Kitchen

The modern kitchen stands as a bold signification of status – the very embodiment of social distinction and good taste. The language used in kitchen magazines to describe modern kitchens stands as testament to this. One kitchen is described as having a ‘refined look’ (Kitchen Trends 22[2]: 11). Similarly, captions for featured kitchens in lifestyle magazines signify pretensions to status, such as ‘Fit for a King’, ‘Creating a New Benchmark’ and ‘A First Class Finish’ (Kitchen & Bathroom Style 1[6]: 23, 28, 70). Lifestyle magazines also position the modern kitchen as a status symbol by emphasising the ideals of luxury – characterised by the usage of ‘commercial or semi-professional’ appliances and ‘luxe finishes’ such as natural or engineered stone benchtops and expensive cabinetry (Kitchen Trends 22[2]: 11, 58).

The appeal of the modern kitchen is grounded on the importance of its aesthetics, where the kitchen is presented as a ‘utility room [that] has been thrust into the limelight and become a design statement’ (Kitchen Trends 22[2]: 8). A ‘sleek, clean aesthetic’ featuring ‘glossy surfaces’ with an emphasis on minimalism characterizes the ideal modern kitchen (Kitchen Trends 22[2]: 20). Signs of domesticity are absent, with kitchens being presented with the occasional carefully placed bowl of fruit or vase of flowers. One particular kitchen that is featured in Kitchen Trends is presented under the caption ‘Culinary Art’ (Kitchen Trends 22[2]: 22). The kitchen is described as ‘a gallery of form and function’ that combines the ideals behind ‘sculpture and whimsical icons’ with practical kitchen design that caters to the owners who are ‘both passionate cooks with a fervour for entertaining’ (Kitchen Trends 22[2]: 23, 24).
This ideal of entertaining dominates representations of the modern kitchen, and represents the core social relation that defines kitchen consumerism. The modern kitchen is ‘designed for easy entertaining’ - a place where the ‘keen cook’ can engage with guests (Kitchen Trends 22[2]: 11, 57). This practice is made possible through open-plan layouts and designs that feature the kitchen as its centerpiece, allowing for ‘easy interaction between chef and guests when entertaining’ (Kitchen Trends 22[2]: 14, 18). The ideal of entertaining is also reflected in the popularity of commercial grade appliances that are suited to food preparation for larger groups of people (Kitchen Trends 22[2]: 9, 58).

ii. The Country Kitchen

The aesthetic of the country kitchen is marked by an idealized vision of domesticity that hinges on a nostalgic vision of family togetherness. This feeling of nostalgia is evident in the display of ‘olde worlde’ furnishings in country kitchens in lifestyle magazines (Country Kitchen & Bathroom Ideas 1[1]: 8). Emphasis is placed on the importance of ‘rustic’ features such as wooden tables and benchtops, ‘old fashioned’ dressers and antique kitchenalia (Country Kitchen & Bathroom Ideas 2[1]: 38, 42). The country kitchen is busy, colourful and often cluttered. ‘Loving touches’ signify markers of domesticity that make the country kitchen ‘both functional and inviting’ such as pots of flowers, kitchen utensils, a pot of tea and cake or fresh bread on the kitchen bench (Country Kitchen & Bathroom Ideas 1[1]: 4-5).

An emphasis on the family is portrayed to be but a part of a broader desire to look back to ‘the days of yesteryear’ in designing a kitchen that caters to family living (Kitchen & Bathroom Ideas 1[1]: 6). Lifestyle magazines present the country kitchen as providing the perfect arena for an authentic family experience, emphasising the lived-in character as ‘real [country] kitchens have this appeal – they are natural and human, rather than perfect’ (Country Kitchen & Bathroom Ideas 1[1]: 13). Feelings of intimacy are said to characterise the country kitchen as a place that ‘evokes a feeling of warmth and comfort’ with its ‘inviting’ atmosphere (Country Kitchen & Bathroom Ideas 1[1]: 4). The country kitchen is the ‘social heart of the home’ and is portrayed as a place where ‘people linger for a chat and to share a confidence… over a steaming cuppa’ (Country Kitchen & Bathroom Ideas 2[1]: 34, 38). Representations of the country kitchen in lifestyle magazines emphasise the kitchen as an arena for authentic familial relationships based on love, care and intimacy. The kitchen is constructed as
the primary arena for family interactions – ‘a place for cooking, eating and talking with the family’ (Country Kitchen & Bathroom Ideas 2[1]: 36).

Discussion

An analysis of new kitchens as depicted in these magazines can be utilised as a broad means by which to illuminate the nature of social relations within the home. The magazines provide a reference point by which to interrogate how the public concerns of social status and the private concerns of interpersonal relationships can be expressed through consumption practices.

The kitchen as suited to entertaining centres around the kitchen as a site of aspirational consumption. The kitchen designed for entertaining is presented as the showpiece of the home, a kitchen that signifies social distinction and good taste. The modern kitchen can be broadly conceptualised as a signifier of status. The magazines in their depictions of kitchens speak to middle-class lifestyle identities. The practice of entertaining is portrayed in the magazines as a social encounter that centres itself around the display of the kitchen as centerpiece. In many ways, this embodies Bourdieu’s (1984) arguments surrounding the nexus between consumerism and social positions. The trend towards ‘larger and better appointed kitchens’ featuring ‘glass doors, engineered stone benchtops and European-look appliances’ along with the flourishing demand for commercial grade appliances can be viewed in light of Bourdieu’s arguments that consumption reflects, sustains and reproduces social relationships of status (Tennent 2004: 4; Tennent 2005:1; Hamilton 2005).

McCracken’s (2005) arguments surrounding ‘home’ and ‘homeyness’ are especially applicable to the country kitchen, where the construction of ‘a place called home’ is central to domestic consumption practices. McCracken’s (2005: 25-26) account of the physical and symbolic properties of ‘homeyness’ correspond exactly to the aesthetics of the country kitchen – characterised by warm colours, natural materials and traditional furnishings with an emphasis upon the creation of a comforting and inviting domestic space. A counter-narrative to consumption as an assertion of status, expressions of ‘homeyness’ in the country kitchen are geared towards the centrality of the family and link directly to ideals of love in interpersonal relationships (Miller 1998; McCracken 2005: 42-43).
The country kitchen with its connotations of ‘homeyness’ stand in opposition to kitchens with pretensions to status. From the perspective of those who prefer a country kitchen, the modern kitchen can be seen as an ‘artificial’ or ‘forced’ construction that appeases the aesthetic of the interior designer or architect rather than taking into account the demands of everyday life in a domestic setting (McCracken 2005: 35; Lawrence & Hirst 2002: 45-6).

The kitchens represented in the magazines can be modelled on a continuum stretching from the ultra-modern, sleek and sterile modern kitchen at one extreme, to the cluttered, busy and noisy country kitchen at the other. This continuum in turn represents two diametrically opposed sets of social relations – the first signifying an all-encompassing devotion to the maintenance of the home as a site conducive to the expression of social status, the second eschewing pretensions to status through a focus on intimate domestic relationships as a repository of meanings that can be brought to bear on domestic consumption practices.

To take a position on either end of this continuum in terms of consumption practices represents an unrealistic challenge for many, but this construction provides a useful means by which to conceptualise consumption patterns along a public-private dichotomy. Modern kitchens as portrayed on the pages of the magazines, with an aesthetic based on minimalism and architectural order, eschew signs of domesticity and the chaos of everyday life (Coward 1984; Lawrence & Hirst, 2002: 51). While such ‘perfect’ aspirational interiors are pleasing to the eye, they are also ‘perfectly uninhabitable’ (McCracken 2005: 42). Similarly, representations of country kitchens in lifestyle magazines are not completely devoid of status distinctions – these kitchens are also ‘staged’ representations that are interestingly devoid of people, yet full of objects. The country kitchen, as represented in the magazines, represents a commodification of family values that are held by McCracken to be firmly out of the reach of the marketplace (2005: 43).

In practical terms, it is more useful to follow Woodward’s (2003) lead in addressing the tensions evident within kitchen consumerist practices. Woodward argues that household items have the dual purpose of signifying ‘conspicuous forms of individual style’ while also functioning as an ‘authentic, even therapeutic, space of shared experience, relaxation, intimacy and emotion’ (2003: 394). The meanings of domestic objects thus shift according to context, and the display of status most often exists
alongside consumption patterns that privilege notions of comfort and intimacy within the domestic sphere.

**Conclusion**

Domestic consumption patterns are marked by the tensions between public concerns of status and class, and private concerns of creating and maintaining familial intimacy. Depictions of kitchens in magazines in many instances simplify these tensions by constructing ideal kitchens that serve as an arena for the performance of public or private social relations rather than articulating the tension between the two. Representations of country kitchens privilege ideas surrounding family, whereas depictions of modern kitchens privilege concerns of social aspiration and status. Further research into representations of and the purchasing of new kitchens would be usefully directed at articulating the ways in which kitchens embody the home as the intersection of the public and the private.

**References**


*Kitchen & Bathroom Style*, 1(4), Silverwater: Express Publications.


