
Food, Drink and Identity



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Identity refers to who we think (or feel) we are, but also to who others think we are. Identities are closely tied to our values, attitudes, beliefs, preferences, behaviours and personality characteristics that distinguish us from others around us. However, none of us are unique in our values, beliefs or our characteristics, and our identities often reflect those of others. Our identities are inevitably shaped by the people we interact with, the environments in which we live, and the cultures that we encounter. Therefore, to best understand how identities emerge, it is important to consider the social and cultural contexts in which people live.

Eating and drinking are universal to all cultures; but, the beliefs and practices surrounding food and drink reflect the particular characteristics of cultures alongside the identities of the people who are part of those cultures. Food, drink and identity interact in multiple ways. This chapter considers these interactions in commercial hospitality and social settings. It examines

the relationship between food, drink and identity from the consumption perspective, i.e. how foods and drinks influence and communicate identities in social and domestic settings; and how identities and the desire to articulate our sense of selves shape when, how and what foods and drinks we consume. The chapter also incorporates the production point of view, particularly within commercial contexts. It discusses how notions of identities are exploited through marketing and in the creation of commercial hospitality experiences. It also considers the ways staff's identities are involved in creating food and drink related experiences.

The chapter is split into five sections: the first examines different conceptions of identity. The second part focuses on the way identities are performed in different social spaces. The third, fourth and fifth sections focus specifically on gender, class and ethnicity, as particular aspects of identity.

Identity, identification and belonging

Before we continue it is important to address three problematic assumptions that can restrict our understanding of identity and its relationship with culture.

- First, it may be assumed that identity is something innate, and that we are born with genetic traits that largely predetermine our values, attitudes, beliefs, preferences and characteristics. We cannot ignore the fact that genetics and inherited traits influence behaviours and identities. However, it is not possible or particularly useful, in this chapter, for us to dwell on the genetic factors underpinning identity. It is also important to bear in mind that biological determinism ignores the importance of socialisation and culture in shaping our identities. Indeed many scientists have attempted to account for the way environmental factors interact with genetics in shaping personality traits (Reimann, Angleitner and Strelau, 1997).
- Second, it may be assumed that the emphasis on values, attitudes, beliefs, preferences and characteristics places identity in the realm

of the mind, and it is thus reduced to a cognitive process. As Burkitt (1999) suggests, the danger with this is that it separates the mind from the body, i.e. thinking from doing and feeling. It is important to stress that we see, touch, smell, hear and taste. We process experiences and sensations through our brains, but engage with the world through our bodies. The multi-sensual nature of human experience, particularly surrounding food and drink, means we cannot ignore the body and physicality in shaping our identities (Bell and Valentine, 1997).

- Third, it may also be assumed that identities are fixed, stable aspects of our psychology. Marketing and advertising frequently invite us to discover or know our 'real' selves – implying that there is an authentic, real self to be revealed. However, this view appears to ignore the dynamic nature of identity and the way our sense of self changes in different stages of our lives or in different domains of activity.

An alternative approach to identity recognises that identities change and that they are shaped by our environment and our relationships with others. Social scientists argue that we continually 'construct' our identities (Hall and Du Gay, 1996). In short, we are different people in different social contexts. For example, we may act or speak differently when eating a family meal than when we are eating with friends or partners. We may also behave differently when in a formal setting, than we do eating or drinking at home or in a more casual venue. Furthermore we prioritise different values, thoughts or behaviours at different stages in our lives. A young, single person may have different priorities than someone older, married with children and various family obligations. The implication of this is that how we think or act, and who we are, constantly shifts.

Writers suggest that rather than thinking of identity as something concrete and stable, it is more useful to think about selves through the notion of *identification* (e.g. Bhabha, 1990, 1996; Hall, 1996). Who we think or feel we are is shaped by how we identify with or against an 'other', or others. We may be more or less like other people in terms of values, characteristics, behaviours, etc. We therefore position ourselves as belonging to a group of people, or being