Eating, looking and living clean: techniques of white femininity in contemporary neoliberal food culture

Abstract

This article contributes to *Gender Work and Organization*'s Special Themed Section on Foodwork, by addressing the intersects of race, gender and class in representations of labour, whiteness and neoliberalism in popular and digital food cultures. The discussion responds to the journal's call for papers by examining the clean eating trend as a vehicle for the ideals of white femininity, and the techniques of femininity that are employed to convey messages of normalcy and exceptionalism in this contemporary popular food culture. In the analysis of an article in the high-end home interiors magazine, *Elle Decoration*, the visual authoritativeness of clean eating advocates is considered to highlight the strategies and devices used to deploy ideals of white femininity and to create boundaries around a remodelled white female neoliberal self. The article aims to advance current debates regarding digital foodwork, by examining the aesthetics of whiteness that are contained within the message of relatability communicated by social media food influencers. Thus, in keeping with the broader concerns of the journal, the article addresses developments in the fields of gender and digital labour, with respect to the overwhelming dominance of privileged white women in this sphere and the aesthetics of their labour, which has thus far received limited attention within existing debates.

Key Words

clean eating, neoliberalism, whiteness, postfeminists, class

Introduction

'Clean eating' is a recent food trend in Western nations (UK, US and Australia). It is significant for the way in which it combines and articulates a range of overlapping contemporary social

phenomena; discourses of post-feminism and its collusion with neoliberalism (Wilkes, 2015), narratives of self-care, the promotion of self-transformation through food media, taste and class, celebrity culture and social media. Thus, in contributing to the journal's Special Themed Section, the article discusses the representation of foodwork as performative labour by examining how positions of race, class and gender intersect in the displays of upper-class white femininity advocating a restrictive diet (omitting the consumption of dairy, bread, meat, sugar, only eating alkaline foods, are some of the stipulations). Digital food influencers can be examined to identify the strategies at work that deploy ideals of whiteness and neoliberal rhetoric in popular food culture. Restrictive diets have become a key element in the "contemporary ethos of trans-Atlantic cultures" (Shome, 2014: 180) and follows in the tracks of the new age therapies that have been embraced by celebrities and "upper-/middle class white women" in the past two decades (Shome, 2014: 178).

The whiteness that pervades this group assumes a 'no-need for-comment' status and feeds into the discourses of normalcy and relatability that predominate in digital media (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Kanai, 2019) and overlaps with the claims of universality that is an expression of white supremacist culture. These observations are attended to in this discussion.

This article discusses the way in which the aesthetic of a "relatable" (Kanai, 2019), and curated upper middle-class white femininity fronts this food trend; an extreme approach to healthy eating. It is a lens through which understanding can be gained about how gender, (assumed to be heterosexual), race and class intersect to promote neoliberal mantras of the hard-working female entrepreneur and individual 'choice', which deny the structural advantages that are ascribed to upper-class white women.

The article will begin with a discussion about the origins of clean-eating and this will be contextualised by considering the emphasis on the individual within academic debates and neoliberal rhetoric (Skeggs, 2004; Wilkes, 2015).

This discussion will draw on Beverley Skeggs' (2004) analysis of contemporary class making and Maurizio Lazzarato's (2009) consideration of the operations of neoliberalism as they have reconstituted the social. In this sense, the triumph of neoliberalism is evident in the way that neoliberal rhetoric has become common sense and works to obfuscate understanding of the realities of structural advantage (Hall and O'Shea, 2013; Bhopal, 2018). Indeed, the effectiveness of neoliberalism has been the way in which its agents have maintained control over narratives regarding ideal subjects and this has been entwined with the universalising tendencies of whiteness. Thus, neoliberal discourses of the individual (or self-interest) and discourses of whiteness appear to work in tandem, with the effect of making subjects such as privileged white women in the clean eating movement appear compelling.

What predominates in neoliberal rhetoric, perhaps unsurprisingly due to its focus on opportunities, rather than constraints or barriers to success, is the assumption that successful individuals deserve to be there, because they have worked hard, and those who do not achieve success, this is due to their own laziness and failure to cultivate the inner resources to be successful (see Bhopal, 2018 and Skeggs, 2004). Thus, there is a notion or implied meritocracy that hard work and enthusiasm win the day (Littler, 2018). Yet, neoliberalism ignores structural racism in its discourse of freedom to choose your future. Such choices are not available to everyone, despite prevailing beliefs of a level playing field (Bhopal, 2018; Littler, 2018) and visual narratives such as those produced and circulated by high-profile influencers are effective in perpetuating these myths.

In social sciences scholarship, it is common-place to identify and theorise social disadvantage, and to conceptualise how structural disadvantage is raced. This frequently involves citing the poor health outcomes, impeded employment and discriminatory housing policies experienced by people who are not white, and explicitly classed. Thus, inequality is more frequently spoken of than privilege in this field. The way in which advantage is structured by whiteness (in the British context), has tended not to elicit the same attention as racism and discrimination (Bhopal, 2018). However, the discipline of sociology has expressed a renewed interest in privileged groups (see Khan, 2011; Savage et al., 2015; Friedman and Laurison, 2020) and in relation to this scholarship, the features and nature of privileged groups are recognised as being complex with internal jostling for "influence" (Savage et al., 2015: 309), but nevertheless they are sustained by a hierarchy where they reside in the upper echelons because it is the practices of white identity, as expressions of whiteness that are afforded specific types of privilege that "dominate all others" (Bhopal, 2018: 25). Middle and upper-class interests appear to be aligned in the visual representations of wellness as white and female, as both class groups have embraced and promoted 'wellness' and healthy eating through consumption as acts of distinction as noted by Raka Shome (2014). There are differences between middle, upper-middle class and elite social groupings, as detailed in Mike Savage et al.'s (2015) research, yet what aligns these groups that are predominantly white and despite being uneven, "is the social networks, mentoring, patronage and power that whiteness brings" (Bhopal, 2018: 5). Analysis of this particular food trend that is classed and raced, allows us to observe the positioning of upper-class white women as not only leaders in the sphere of the clean eating movement, but also as emblems of whiteness. The discussion contends that their social positioning and privilege is played down in order that they appear relatable and 'normal' or "everyday, nice people" (Ingraham, 2008: 182), in fact a presentation of more middle-class ordinary, than

Savage et al.'s (2015: 309) "ordinarily wealthy"; a strategy used to detract attention away from their upper-class positions.

One of the key concerns here, is the way in which neoliberal rhetoric is "nourished and maintained" (Lazzarato, 2009: 117) through popular culture and visual narratives. What I would like to examine, is the deployment of representations of the ideal entrepreneur. The white female upper-class food blogger, the post-feminist subject, who appears to fit with this description of the ideal subject, in their adoption of Web 2.0 technologies that display the "requisite skills" (Skeggs, 2004: 57) necessary to undertake the self-transformation which neoliberalism demands. Neoliberal regimes stress worker flexibility (and insist upon) individuals packaging themselves within these new capitalist structures as risk-taking entrepreneurs (Lazzarato, 2009). I am specifically interested in the techniques of white femininity and self-management that are adopted to promote relatable clean eating celebrities and the way in which spurious (and now discredited scientific claims about food) could be made by clean eaters without denting their apparent success and popularity.

The article undertakes a visual analysis of the aesthetics of prominent clean eating advocates, by examining an article entitled 'Kitchen Revolution' published in the high-end home interiors and design magazine, *Elle Decoration* (2015). The article was selected as it is an example of how clean eating was beginning to be promoted in the mainstream media. The *Elle Decoration* article announces the 'newness' of clean eaters and does the work of signalling their visual authority, by drawing on traditional techniques of femininity that have historically created boundaries around who can and cannot be considered to be feminine. Despite notions of relatability and generalizability, there are strict parameters around who can access contemporary femininity that is highly valued. It is both classed and raced (Swan and Perrier, 2019) and orchestrated by ideal white bodily performances in contemporary popular food

culture that are continuously repeated and remodelled, so as to facilitate the misrecognition of whiteness as power.

Historically, middle and upper-class white women have been considered to be the epitome of beauty and the beautifying practices favoured by Anglo and Western women have served to exclude non-white women and particularly women of African descent (Cole and Sabik, 2009; Tate, 2012). Black feminist scholarship will be drawn upon to articulate the specific aesthetics and strategies that are used to construct white female entrepreneurs as visually authoritative and their claims to relatability.

The clean eating trend has ambassadors from the US, Canada and Australia; however, the focus of this article is clean eaters based in the UK.

The postfeminist context

Independence, choice and freedom are claimed to be the features of this contemporary social context. The new freedoms spoken of as access to professional careers and employment rights, access to higher education, freedom from the social constraints of marriage, and the freedom to actualise the self as independent. These freedoms are gains (or concessions) reached by the feminist movement and is a period now popularly described as being postfeminist. The term postfeminist is widely used, yet contested in cultural studies scholarship (Gill and Scarff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009). The beneficiaries of this new period are identified as being young, white middle and upper-class women and are the focus of this discussion. As neoliberalism's ideal subjects (Wilkes, 2015), these women embody the success of neoliberalism and their techniques of femininity deflect attention away from the structural advantages and precarity that are shaping the contemporary iteration of capitalism in which digital work is particularly lauded and promoted (Gregg, 2008).

Neoliberalism and post-feminism have a close relationship as they share the same language; independence, choice and freedom. Indeed, neoliberalism co-opted the language of feminism and distorted its message (Wilkes, 2015). What I aim to do in this work, is to extend the discussion that this scholarship has established (Gill and Scarff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009), by examining the visual language of neoliberalism. I am interested in the visual culture of this ideology and how neoliberalism makes demands of its new type of worker, to be branded and packaged, already identified as white, female and upper-middle class.

My focus is the whiteness of neoliberalism in this food media, as it is whiteness that sets the ideal standards for all subjects to aspire to. As Akane Kanai (2019) suggests, social media work that is undertaken by privileged white women are positions (despite the evident spurning of this by women who are not white – see Shirley Tate, 2016), to which "others would *want* to relate" (Kanai, 2019: 126, emphasis in the original). Whiteness requires its message of superiority to be heard and if not accepted, tolerated. It requires advocates and figureheads to convey its claims of exceptionalism *whilst at the same time* claim to be universal. To maintain claims of universality requires persuasive strategies; practices that ensure that this positioning is secure by repeatedly convincing all within its structures that it is relevant. Thus, the language of whiteness is self-referential and communicates "distinctive self-assurance" (Savage et al., 2015: 99).

When speaking of neoliberalism

There is much debate regarding definitions of the term *neoliberalism* (see Dawes, 2020; Collins and Rothe, 2020; Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005). Defining neoliberalism is not an easy endeavour due to the way in which is it deployed to describe different political regimes, economic and social policies, and the way that it intersects with globalization and imperialism (Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005: 1-2).

In this article, I refer to the definition of neoliberalism as an ideology that has influenced governments in countries of relative affluence (Lazzarato, 2009) to restructure their economies by deregulating financial markets, privatize state assets along with state handouts to corporations (Bhattacharyya, 2015), instituting punitive welfare regimes; and creating new conditions of poverty and precarity (Lazzarato, 2009: 128). These measures have included the withdrawal of formal structures of employment; "big work" (Horowitz 2014 cited in Duffy and Hund, 2015) that once offered employment conditions of employee training, pensions and sick and holiday pay. In this remaking of economies, the emphasis is on individual working and for the worker to be self-governing and flexible. Attributes that are professed to make an 'entrepreneur'.

Ann Gray (2003) observes that during the 1990s, there was an emergence of female entrepreneurs, who became cultural intermediaries and advised on a range of practices in the areas of "presentation of the self", "care of the body" and "aesthetics and design" (Gray, 2003: 491). Clean eating advocates have risen to prominence through the medium of blogging about cooking, providing tutorials and talking about their food choices via social media and internet platforms such as YouTube. They could be described as the next generation of female entrepreneurs, now described as lifestyle gurus and 'influencers', who perform their consultancy via social media. The emergence of lifestyle gurus has coincided with the rise of popular food cultures in Western nations, most notable in the television cooking genre, that includes programmes hosted by celebrity chefs, and the renewed interest in cookery books (Wilkes, 2019) and websites that feature curated and stylized food.

The British bestselling clean eating authors began professing the message of plant-based and unprocessed food diets via social media and transitioned to traditional media. As a consequence, diets that had previously been on the margins of Western healthy eating cultures

(Freeman, 2015), made it into the mainstream, as in 2016 the buzz words were 'clean eating', 'raw food', and 'free from' (*What Britain Buys* 2016). The rise of this trend was observed by one literary agent who claimes that around 2015 "the market was scouring Instagram for copycats – specifically very pretty, very young girls pushing curated food and lifestyle" (Ross quoted in Wilson, 2017: 25). What is highlighted here is the work that was undertaken by the existing media apparatus; publishing houses and PR agencies, who worked to ensure that white femininity was the dominant presence in this sphere of digital foodwork.

These practices have become a way of expressing cultural capital as knowledge and difference, particularly in the adoption of specific foods that have become synonymous with the middle classes in the UK, such as quinoa (a staple of Peru) and chia seeds (a native plant of central and southern Mexico) of are examples of this (*What Britain Bought in 2015*). Thus, Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato (2018) observe that "the evolution of food [is] … a growing source of cultural capital" (LeBesco and Naccarato, 2018: 4). Raka Shome (2014) also notes the way in which upper-class white women have taken up practices of Asian origin, such as yoga and spiritual therapies, exemplifying the project of whiteness to "sustain[s] and reinvent[s] itself" (Shome, 2014: 44), that ultimately conveys white femininity as an impenetrable visual authority in popular culture.

A survey of clean eating websites, magazines and displays in book shops, demonstrates that clean eating is promoted by established norms of white femininity; flawless skin, long, glossy hair and slim physiques. These white women carry the discourse of "the life project of whiteness" (Shome, 2014: 199) and as noted by Kanai (2019) and Duffy and Hund (2015) the bloggers they interviewed were overwhelmingly white and had existing social and economic capital that they could draw on. This scholarship draws attention to the whiteness of the prominent bloggers (GIF-based visual blogs and fashion blogs), yet an analysis of whiteness

as articulating power is not included in their discussions and is one of the central aims of this discussion.

In Beverley Skeggs' (2004) analysis of racialised positions, specifically in the designation of black working-class masculinities as 'cool', Skeggs (2004) concludes that this is a desirable position, but one that has little exchange value. In the example to which she refers, blackness is desirable and dangerous. Making blackness an essentialised position that is almost immovable. I would like to draw on this discussion to consider the way in which the dominant system of exchange *allows* for the expansion for specific subjects; upper-class white women and their endeavours in the making of class through a careful curation of aesthetics in their self-branding and techniques of femininity that are twinned with knowledge production as a way of reproducing narratives about whiteness as superior in hierarchies of beauty and social worth.

In critiquing Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck's conceptualisation of the reflexive individual and individualization, where "individuals reflexively construct their biographies and identities" (Skeggs, 2004: 52), Skeggs (2004) draws on Mike Savage et al.'s (1992) research to conclude that the reflexive and enterprising identity is based on middle-class experiences and their assumed available resources. Savage et al. (1992) identified the pursuit of cultural practices that the middle classes have been able to utilise and transform themselves through lifestyle, health and dietary choices. This has occurred at the very moment of neoliberalism's individualization and its demands for the management of the self, and also chimes with the "individualism of Thatcherism" (Skeggs, 2004: 57) to become entrepreneurs.

In their assessment of the shifting structures of capitalism, Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, argue that class is no longer relevant, is in decline and people identify themselves through what they consume rather than, as Giddens and Beck see it, redundant class positions. However, in

order to become a reflexive individual and to adopt the lifestyle changes to undertake self-renewal, Skeggs (2004) argues that this is only possible by having the “requisite resources” (Skeggs, 2004: 57). Thus, neoliberalism is about making choices within strict parameters (Lazzarato, 2009). As Skeggs (2004) argues, choice itself is a resource (ibid: 139). Being able to make the ‘right’ choices depends on having the resources in the first place. Neoliberalism is not concerned with those who do not have sufficient resources, evident in the responses of its agents and advocates who suggest that for example, those who experience food poverty, do not know how to cook and are simply making the ‘wrong choices’ (see O’Connell and Hamilton, 2017; O’Hara, 2014).

This abandonment of class analysis in the context of the establishment of an “enterprise society” (Lazzarato, 2009: 119) deflects attention away from the inequalities on which neoliberal societies are based. Indeed, those inequalities have become further entrenched with decades of wage depression and decreasing standards of living in both the US and the UK (Bhattacharyya, 2015; Khan, 2012).

Neoliberal rhetoric emphasises the freedom from constraints and the possibilities and opportunities to become an entrepreneur now ‘freed’ from traditional paid employment. All based on the individual’s own abilities, and the suggestion that anyone can be an entrepreneur of the self. However, in practice neoliberal economies are based on (re)producing inequalities, precarity, and actively creates the conditions in which individuals are faced with taking on increased risk (Lazzarato, 2009). For example, not knowing whether you will earn enough to live on (Duffy and Hund, 2015). The consequences of taking on financial risks are not the same for all individuals. This is as neoliberalism constructs a narrative about what the ideal subject should be like (as though they do not already exist). Yet when examined, the very ideal subject that they are speaking of, does already exist in the form of the white upper-middle classes who

already possess the resources and skills to produce an enterprising self (Skeggs, 2004). Thus, neoliberalism's ploy of inviting subjects to become ideal subjects, is not actually an invitation, but an established condition of the upper-middle classes. Neoliberalism's rhetoric is evidence of the elite's ability to disseminate common sense understandings to explain our current systems of inequality (Bhattacharyya, 2015) and at the same time, legitimizes the mechanisms through which advantage is an expectation for the already well-resourced.

Academic analysis frequently addresses the construction of working-class positions within systems of exchange, and their negotiations within this system that restricts their access to power (Skeggs, 1997). In addition, there are discussions that address power as hidden and is frequently misrecognised (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992 cited in Skeggs, 2004: 4). And as such, the seemingly natural accrual of economic and material rewards to the already privileged remains largely unquestioned (Biressi and Nunn, 2016).

However, in an extract from Bridget Byrne's (2006) *White Lives*, the respondent *Emma*, speaks of middle-class entitlements and expectations of uninhibited mobility; *going off around the world for a year*, in which there is an absence of any concerns about earning a living. *Emma* ultimately speaks of the assumed ability to attain wealth by stating aspirations of *wanting to make a fortune*.

> Emma: Because I think there's something about middle-class people who expect people of about 20 going on 25, I think from my experience they expect them to be very go-getty and 'oh I'm going off around the world for a year, and then I'm going to go to college, and then I'm going to' you know that kind of thing and to be very kind of go-getty and wanting to make a fortune (Byrne, 2006: 91).

What is expressed in this extract adheres to Skegg's (2004) observation that choice is informed by class positions, and *Emma's* expression of choice, that is affluence and privilege, are explicit characterisations of what it means to be white and middle-class.

The face of eating clean

The clean eating trend is fronted by slim conventionally attractive, young white women. Some of whom are Ella Mills (née Woodward), daughter of a former Labour cabinet minister and Sainsbury's heiress, Natasha Corrett, daughter of millionaire interiors designer, Kelly Hoppen, and authors of *The Art of Eating Well*, sisters Jasmine and Melissa Hemsley, are the daughters of a lieutenant colonel in the British army and software asset manager. There is also Amelia Freer, former personal assistant to Prince Charles and author of *Eat. Nourish. Glow*. Joe Wicks, who also goes by the name of *The Body Coach*, and James Duigan are the male exceptions in this new community of self-styled health gurus.

In the September 2015 issue of the home interiors and design magazine *Elle Decoration*, their 'Kitchen Revolution' feature describes their profiled clean eating advocates and food writers, as "clean and green pioneers" and "cooks and wellness experts who are leading the clean-eating revolution" (*Elle Decoration*, 2015: 91,105). Former model Rosemary Ferguson is described as the 'green juice goddess', Natasha Corrett is 'the alkaline queen' and Madeleine Shaw is celebrated as the 'glowing gourmet'.

> *A new health food movement is sweeping the nation and has us all obsessed with green juices, spiralized vegetables and sugar-free goodies. But what does this mean for our kitchens? Here, we meet three 'clean and green' pioneers to discuss their top tips and essential kit. (Elle Decoration, 2015)*

The process of individualization and placing oneself in competition with other entrepreneurs as neoliberalism dictates (Lazzarato, 2009) is evident in the article as each clean eater is presented as possessing a specific skill or attribute. Ferguson is a "kale whizzer" and "a very modern nutritionist with a refreshing sense of balance". Corrett's specialism is "alkaline eating" and her "recipes make this concept accessible to us all". In the case of Shaw, she has the "glow" and emphasises cooking with natural ingredients. Each clean eater has been photographed in their kitchen in a series of performative bodily displays (shots of them chopping vegetables, weighing ingredients, or in relaxed poses that invite an admiring gaze). Such images reinforce the message that they have authority in this sphere.

Figure 1. Rosemary Ferguson photographed for *Elle* Decoration (2015)

The article ties clean eating to the consumption and accumulation of expensive kitchen gadgets, as each clean eater is asked about the mixers, juicers, bread and ice-cream makers that they use in their kitchens. Detailing this consumption is also a way of signalling their competency and legitimizes the clean eaters as food 'experts' or technicians with knowledge to pass on. A picture of the clean eaters' recent recipe books is presented to further emphasise their authority as food experts.

The article communicates a message about the successful management of food, a concern that is of relevance when striving for relatability in what are recognised as “girlfriend cultures” (Winch, 2013). The social media communities in which young, white and privileged women gather, convey a reality in which food obsession has become acceptable (Bordo, 1998: 215). The emphasis is on monitoring food for their perceived unhealthy qualities and food branded *free from* aids this practice. Therefore, denying oneself specific foods, relates to Akane Kanai’s (2019) observation that much of the traffic on the GIF-blogs analysed for *Gender, Relatability and Digital Culture*, is about adhering to the social norms of being thin; a prescription of white upper-class femininity. The clean eaters set themselves up as examples of how to be perfect, ‘have it all’ *and* successfully demonstrate self-restraint with regards to food consumption.

Being thin is a sign of being disciplined and allows white middle and upper-class women to retain their moral positions (Featherstone 1991 cited in Skeggs, 2004: 75). Discourses of the dominant ideal of thinness is evident in the discourses of clean eaters *as* white femininity. It is an indication of perfection and a trait that has been observed as a requirement for postfeminist subjects, and is aligned with the pursuit of thinness “as a form of self-care” (Malson 1998 quoted in Hodge 2014: 67). Ideas of self-care also feature in discourses of the neoliberal self, instructing subjects to engage in self-care as an indication of social competence and also indicates submission, acquiescence, and adherence to neoliberal rhetoric. Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) observation that the higher the social class, the thinner the women in his study (Bourdieu 1984 cited in Skeggs 2004: 101) provides some insight into the “standards of body regulation” (Kanai, 2019: 40) in this class. The attainment of thinness through disciplined consumption is a dominant theme that continues to run through popular culture (Hodge, 2014). Also referred to as the “tyranny of slenderness” (Chermin 1981 quoted in Bordo, 1998: 214). The attainment and performance of such ideals are transmitted via popular visual culture, as in the case of the

Women's Health (2017) magazine cover where Ella Mills appears in crop-top and pants, displaying her slender body and flat stomach.

Middle and upper-class young women who deem it necessary to closely manage what they eat to be 'perfect' within their social class, means not eating food that is desirable (such as junk food, or lots of food) and is not socially acceptable (Kanai, 2019). Clean eaters offer up a mechanism through which food can be managed and displayed as a lifestyle 'choice', as in the comment by Corrett, that her way of eating alkaline "is a lifestyle, not a diet" (Natasha Corrett, quoted in *Elle Decoration*, 2015: 96).

What differs from the established upper-class icons of food culture such as Nigella Lawson, is that "cooking should be pleasurable and should start from a desire to eat" (Hollows, 2003: 182). In the case of clean eating, food and eating are very closely managed, not necessarily to be enjoyed. In this sense Nigella's rejection of seeking perfection, restraint and dieting in her cooking activities, as presented on her television programmes and in her cookery books (Hollows, 2003), is what differentiates her presentation from the current visually dominant clean eaters. What is also evident is that it is possible for different generations of women who are considered to be "respectable and socially approved" (Savage et al. 2015: 91), to compete in the sphere of foodwork and therefore it is possible for "multiple" ideals of white femininity to be "circulat[ing] and compet[ing] at the same time (Hollows, 2003: 181).

In the contemporary context the pursuit of thinness continues and is promoted via digital food media. The visual language of these ideals *stand in for* white femininity. Despite the well-documented damage that this practice does to young (white) women (Cole and Sabik, 2009), a thin white female body is still the one that "is most valued" and what is considered to be most "powerful" (ibid: 181).

To be a successful clean eater, you need to be relatable, modest and not stray from traditional gender norms. What appears to be new, is the vehicle through which their message of femininity is being communicated; social media and online platforms. Privileged white femininity, like capitalism, capitalises on the 'new'. As in the case of Jane Fonda, who reinvented herself as a fitness expert, disseminating her new identity through the new technology at that time, which were video tapes (Callahan, 2016). In the contemporary context, social media technologies and online platforms have enabled a new generation of gurus to have direct access to their consumers/fans, have more control over their image and to be directly remunerated for their efforts. However, traditional print media and television still provide legitimacy for their endeavours and access to those audiences. Although new media technologies are important in the development of lifestyle gurus, what is evident is that the messages about white femininity that are remodelled, continue to draw on established narratives of white women as "emblem[s] of beauty" (Hobson, 2005: 10). Clean eating has ensured that white beauty ideals remain dominant and that we continue to be "…weaned on Euro-centric beauty values" (Arogundade 2000 quoted in Hobson, 2005: 9). Examples of which can be found in children's media, such as *Disney's* fairy-tale princesses who are "defined by appearance" (Cole and Sabik, 2009: 173) and perpetuate a white norm of being "white and beautiful", having "beautiful white arms" and in the case of the *Little Mermaid* in human form has "the prettiest white legs a girl could wish for" (Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Anderson quoted in Hurley, 2005: 224).

The clean eating advocates rely heavily on prescribed norms of white femininity as they are young, or have a youthful appearance. The *Elle Decoration* photographs draw on established markers of white female beauty, as in the case of Madeleine Shaw, whose tagline 'Get the Glow' is synonymous with what Richard Dyer (1993) identifies as a marker of white beauty in visual culture, specific lighting is used to ensure that "idealised white women are bathed in and

permeated by light … In short, they glow" (Dyer, 1997: 122). Shaw's achievement in having attained the so-called 'glow' is evidenced in the portrait image of her taken in her rustic kitchen with light streaming in from the window on the left of the image. As in Dyer's discussion of the strategic use of light to illuminate white women, particularly with blond hair, this is to suggest that white women are lit from within (ibid). This is a practice that constructs whiteness and elevates white skin as possessing some kind of otherworldly quality (Dyer, 1997: 122; see also Shome (2014) for a discussion on the strategic use of light to photograph white celebrity motherhood).

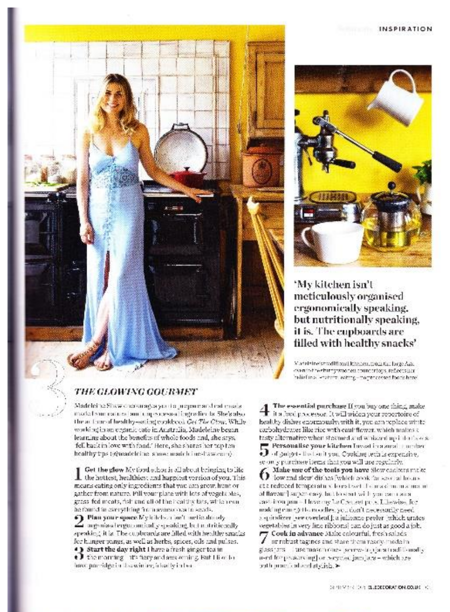

Figure 2. Madeleine Shaw photographed for *Elle Decoration* (2015)

Conveying modesty

Conveying modesty, has traditionally been a white upper-middle class preoccupation (Craik, 1993). There are attempts to convey this in the styling of the women in the *Elle Decoration* feature, as they have been photographed to appear as though they are wearing no make-up and echoes the message of eating clean, the women have 'clean' appearances. They look natural, have flaw-less skin and look 'whole-some', pure. This is also referencing claims to higher cultural value as Skeggs (2004) argues, it is the appearance of the "natural, rather than artifice" (Skeggs, 2004: 101) that achieves this. During the 1960s, the cosmetics brand *Love* promoted make-up to achieve a "freer, more natural" look that was intended to disguise the effort required to apply cosmetics and conveyed a relationship between class and cosmetics that suggested the labour of make-up application "with the working class" (Frank 1997 quoted in Skeggs, 2004: 101).

The aesthetic of upper-class white femininity is coded in the styling of the hair of the clean eaters in the *Elle Decoration* feature, and also attests to the significance of hair in communicating the character of a woman in white Western visual cultures (Velody 2008). Thus, Skeggs (2004) notes that styles of hair adopted by white working-class women (the way they change the texture of their hair, use perms or sculpt their hair into specific shapes), are deemed to demonstrate excess and is attributed with low cultural value (Skeggs, 2004: 101-102). Yet, this is low value from the perspective of the middle and upper-classes (ibid). Therefore, it is notable that the women in the *Elle Decoration* feature appear to have 'natural beauty'. They do not have permed or obviously dyed hair, but hair that appears to be naturally shiny (there is a fetish of having long, shiny hair in the white beauty industry). Their hair has been attended to, but not so much as to appear 'done'. All three women have slightly wavy, shoulder-length hair, and in the case of Corrett and Shaw, their hair has been carefully

positioned to rest on each shoulder. All three women notably carry the style of the centre parting. A look that is particularly favoured by other clean eaters; Ella Mills and Amelia Freer are examples. Skeggs (2004) argues, that hairstyles as well as body-shape signal class, and the class positions of the clean eaters is called attention to in the *Elle Decoration* feature.

The postfeminist clean eaters actively position themselves as ‘normal’. Normalcy has currency in the creation of personas in the sphere of social media communities, keen to convey a message of “real women”, or “like me” personas (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 9; Kanai, 2019) and also to convey the assumed “likeability, positivity and ‘goodness’” that Kanai observes, white middle-class women have historically enjoyed (Kanai, 2019: 56). Constructing normalcy and attempts to create a relaxed, natural, and approachable look that is casual, yet still stylized is evident in the *Elle Decoration* feature. Shaw wears a vintage, pale blue, button-through, summer dress. The dress touches the floor and has spaghetti straps, with lace detailing in the centre of the dress. She wears gladiator sandals and has painted toenails to suggest a relaxed, yet glamorous approach to cooking. Her styling is juxtaposed with the rustic style of the kitchen, painted in a shade of yellow that resembles the traditional paint company Little Greene’s *Mister David*; described as their “brightest yellow” which “has been used to capture the sun in French country kitchens” (Little Greene Paint, 2018). The country style is emphasised by the large terracotta storage jar and the Aga cooker on which she rests her left hand. In contrast to Shaw’s overt feminine styling, Ferguson and Corrett wear jeans and tops. This is a strategy used in the styling of Ella Mills for the cover of *healthy* (2017) magazine, in which she wears a non-descript grey jumper and denim dungarees. This construction of casual, unremarkable feminine attire appears almost dull, in an attempt to deflect attention away from what they are wearing and veers towards conveying understated good taste as historically white middle and upper-class women have been defined as exemplars of decorum and good taste. In the case of the *Elle Decoration*

article, they conform to this well-rehearsed approach that has become a short-hand for identifying white femininity as modesty and respectability.

Natasha Corrett's portrait evokes "the patriarchal model of the [respectable] good girl" (Perlmutter 2000 quoted in Hobson, 2005: 122; Manne, 2018). Her slightly tilted head and comportment of crossed legs whilst seated on a vintage chair, clasping a mug, convey a persona that she is inherently 'a good girl'.

Figure 3. Natasha Corrett photographed for *Elle Decoration* (2015)

The understated styling could also be observed as a particularly middle-class process of self-making (Strathern 1992 cited in Skeggs, 2004: 139), and a strategy to diminish the appearance of upper-classness as to *appear* ordinarily middle-class. However, the attempts to convey a relaxed and approachable personae and "lifestyle" are undermined by the staged nature of the

photographs in which Corrett wears a white silk top whilst cooking with chocolate and strawberries. Although an impractical choice of clothing when cooking with foods that stain, this points to the fantasy nature of the feature. Therefore, analysis of the techniques used to convince and persuade audiences of clean eating white femininity as ‘normal’, is especially necessary as the ideal postfeminist subject is repeatedly presented as simply normative middle-class, within neoliberal class projects (Harvey 2005 cited in Repo and YrJölä, 2015; Smith quoted in McLoughlin, 2013: 116). It also highlights how popular food culture is “an effective vehicle for circulating cultural values and ideologies” (LeBesco and Naccarato, 2018: 1).

There is tension between representing these women as special white women, yet relatable at the same time. This is as the women in the *Elle Decoration* feature are also constructed as being exceptional, which is conveyed by the descriptions that are highly gendered, and in Western popular culture are racialized as being ascribed to whiteness; “goddess”, “queen” and “glowing”, are all terms used to identify and valorise *white* femininity and places them on a higher plain (Dyer 1997) and is reinforced by the natural light that falls directly on the women’s faces, that serves to convey their special status as discussed in the case of Madeleine Shaw above.

It is questionable as to whether this is at all relatable despite the universalizing tendencies of white popular culture. The idea being, that white culture is applicable to everyone, white life experiences are used to define humanity, and therefore there is really no need to reflect or represent difference.

A contradiction in the visual authority of clean eaters is the reliance on techniques of white femininity that have traditionally been curated to exclude black women (Cole and Sabik, 2009; Hobson, 2005). The very attributes that they use to deem themselves superior are the same ones used to reject black women within the sphere of femininity. For example, the prevailing

discourse in beauty ideals that long, straight hair is a necessary attribute to be considered beautiful (Tate, 2010); the idealisation of white and pale skin as in the creation of creams that aim to achieve alabaster skin (see Dyer's 1997 discussion of Helena Rubinstein's face creams). Black women are encouraged to attain a glow, yet they must embrace a chemical process in order to achieve this, as in the product *Bleach and Glow* (ibid: 122).

A revolution in the kitchen

In the retraditionalization of gender, where gender roles have become more constrained (Bhattacharyya, 2015: 149), the kitchen is not a space of drudgery, rather, it is a 'revolutionary', space (as in the strategic titling across the picture of Ferguson's kitchen; 'Kitchen Revolution'). It is where the business of self-renewal takes place and where the private space of the home blurs with the world of work, as is commented on in the article, "the space [the kitchen] is both the heart of the family's Cotswolds home and Ferguson's recipe HQ when she isn't at her nutrition consultancy on London's Harley Street" (Brook, 2015: 92). Their competence is not tied to their ability to display an ideal of domesticity, rather, the feature calls attention to them as affluent career women, and as observed by Rosalind Gill (2010), that "her [female media entrepreneur's] entire existence is built around work" (Gill 2010 quoted in Duffy and Hund, 2015: 3).

Rosemary Ferguson carries the *Elle Decoration* feature, with the framing of her kitchen as revolutionary. Both she and her kitchen are being advertised as 'revolutionaries'. A former model, in a model kitchen. Although the kitchen is in Ferguson's home, it resembles a lab, with large brown cupboards, extensive marble worktops with an installation of antique opaline pendant Lassco lights. The kitchen is laid out on a glossy concrete floor and is of a size and

scale of kitchens used by chefs on television cooking programs. This is a luxury space in keeping with the kitchen adverts sandwiched in between the feature.

Figure 4. Rosemary Ferguson photographed for *Elle Decoration* (2015)

Clean eating demonstrates that a fetishism of food can be “easily abstracted and commodified to meet the demands of capitalist work” (Shin and Sung-Yul Park, 2015: 446). It has successfully been entwined with the demands of constant self-renewal in the “hypercommercial cultural landscape” (Shome, 2014: 182) that is sustained by the health food industry and is claimed to be worth $3.4 trillion (McGroarty, 2016) and facilitated by “a multi-billion-dollar tech platform” (Wilson, 2017: 25).

Foods such as chia seeds and quinoa have become synonymous with middle-class eating habits and have been popularized by clean eaters. These choices reflect a narrow perspective, and has become valuable “knowledge” and a sign of white female authority. What is being leaned on here, is the relationship between “aesthetic disposition as being inseparable from cultural competence” (Skeggs, 2004: 141) This aesthetic of skilled, yet demure, modest and likeable

personae legitimates the clean eaters' position and practice of "educating others in 'how to live' by a 'symbolic action'" (Bonner and du Gay, 1992: 183). This group of clean eaters "legitimate(s) itself and the lifestyle(s) it puts forward as model" (Bonner and du Gay, 1992: 183). Thus, Ferguson, refers to her practice of juicing fruit and vegetables as a way to "make yourself feel slightly virtuous" (Ferguson quoted in *Elle Decoration*, 2015: 92). Ferguson states that she uses Himalayan pink salt to season her homemade bread. Such comments demonstrate the construction of ''new' ethical selves through notions of good taste and cultural capital, where "better taste is usually aligned to upper-middle-class ideas" (Wood and Skeggs 2004 quoted in Smith, 2013: 146). The wellness movement demonstrates the social construction of taste (Wright, 2010: 275) through the creation of personal brands and the possession of cultural capital that seems to be enmeshed in senses of "entitlement and authority" (Savage et al., 2015: 97). These informal knowledges are packaged and commercialised through visual displays of neoliberal "utopias of self-sufficiency" (Hall, Massey and Rustin, 2013: 19).

Middle and upper-class white femininity traditionally set the conditions for their continued relevance and the parameters that define themselves as morally superior. That is, the use of their class position to garner admiration, inspiration and construct desire in others that encourage emulation in their performance of modesty, beautifying practices and bodily displays. Positioned as superior femininity, white women carry a discourse of white exceptionalism.

As a class group, elite white women (re)produce narratives about their exceptional knowledge and capabilities (their cultural and social capital), which sets them apart, allows them to claim uniqueness. It also serves to distinguish them from the working classes. In the cultural sphere, black women are not positioned as exceptional. Elite black women are constructed as *exceptions* in the cultural landscape in which they have been historically defined as a problem

(Hobson, 2005; Tate, 2012). Even within the parameters of standing as exceptions, there are limits to this, as in the case of Michelle Obama who was problematic for whiteness as her blackness challenged the preserve of white beauty as the dominant ideal (Tate, 2012). Therefore, despite the claim, or weak attempts to be relatable, it is not possible for these clean eaters to be relatable to the very women they exclude on the basis of their ascribed superior beauty.

Clean eating: creating 'knowledge' in the blogosphere and beyond

There has been adverse publicity regarding the proclaimed benefits of restrictive diets (reported in the BBC documentaries, *Clean Eating – The Dirty Truth* and *Clean Eating's Dirty Secrets*), and food bloggers with high media profiles such as Ella Mills (née Woodward) and Natasha Corrett have subsequently distanced themselves from the term 'clean eating'. However, despite the debunked claims, clean eating has remained popular (Wilson, 2017). What is significant as food writer and journalist Bee Wilson (2017) attests, is the lack of science or credibility of the claims made by some proponents of clean eating. Mills previously claimed that "plant-based sources of calcium are actually better for us too as they're not acidic at all and so the calcium stays in our bones, rather than being leached into the blood to alkalise the body" (Ella Woodward, 2015: 247). Madeleine Shaw has claimed that "wheat is like sandpaper for the gut" (Madeleine Shaw, 2015) and the Hemsley sisters have previously advised that "gluten breaks down the microvilli in your small intestine" (quoted on *Clean Eating's Dirty Secrets*). What is significant is that clean eaters are predominantly nutritionists (Freeman, 2015), a title that can be easily acquired without medical training. However, clean eaters have offered guidance regarding dietary practices (ibid). This differs to dieticians, which requires a "recognised clinical qualification" (Mitchell, 2019: 21)[1].

The food bloggers' claims encapsulate the signifying practices of food blogging as knowledge production, since what the bloggers have to say does not necessarily need to be accurate, they only need to sound credible, thus they are "implicitly understood" (Wiegman, 2003: 240) as visually authoritative and this reinforces the existing discourses of healthy eating or veganism that are equated with moral superiority and whiteness (Ko, 2017: 85; Bailey, 2007). As indicated in this discussion, clean eating is dominated by very slim and well-groomed white women who have attained a public platform to express their personal experiences and food preferences as a form of rational knowledge (however inaccurate this turns out to be[2]). Yet, food bloggers have been able to universalize a particular white woman's view of what it means to be healthy as the foods that they promote "ultimately reflect[ed] the privileges of a white middle- and upper-class ethos" (Shome, 2014: 88). Bloggers such as Ella Mills, Madeleine Shaw and the Hemsley sisters' popularity and commercial success conveys "the very production of what is intelligible and valuable" (O'Flynn and Petersen, 2007: 460) through their position as privileged white women.

This is in the case of the audience's response to a panel of speakers at the 2016 Cheltenham Literary Festival. Madeleine Shaw, dietician Renee McGregor and food writer and journalist Bee Wilson[3] shared a platform at the event. Wilson recounts the hostility expressed by the audience when she asked Shaw to explain why she had advised her followers not to eat bread, to which Wilson informs, Shaw denied making the suggestion (Wilson, 2017). McGregor expressed concern that "treating young people with eating disorders, she had seen first-hand how the rules and restrictions of clean eating often segued into debilitating anorexia or orthorexia" (McGregor quoted in Wilson, 2017: 25)[4]. The audience booed Wilson and McGregor, and following the talk they were the subject of unflattering comments regarding their appearance on social media (ibid). However, it is significant that the audience were

resistant to exploring the basis of Shaw's claims and the willingness to believe the pronouncements of a celebrity/brand.

The audience's response suggests support for a construction of white femininity that is accepted and revered. Shaw conveys normative classed white femininity in the beauty economy that is presumed to be heterosexual (Bartky, 2010: 416). This focus on appearance that does not stray from the accepted ideal of white femininity as middle class (Smith 2013 cited in McLoughlin, 2013: 166), secures the clean eaters' legitimacy as such women are socially approved and represented as "holding the reigns of middle class respectability" (Freeman, 2014: 15) and subsequently power and authority. This works to reinforce the purveying "self-image of the higher classes of western societies" (Warde, 2001: 215) in that those with "power have attempted to legitimize their own taste as good taste" (ibid). It is the white upper-class female body that carries the discourse of good taste within white supremacist and patriarchal regimes.

These images are juxtaposed with characterizations of defective, abject subjects – those who do not have the capacity to transform themselves as individually responsible within regimes of self-care are considered lazy and incapable of making the 'right' choices (Shome, 2014). Yet, this vision masks the basis on which neoliberalism operates; the rewards that are delivered to a privileged few and are structured by its inherent racial inequality (Lipsitz, 2006). Whiteness is structured by racial and economic privileges that are repeatedly denied (Gzranka, 2014) by focusing on the notion that clean eaters are hard-working entrepreneurs[5]. This is recognised by Raka Shome in her discussion of the rhetoric about hard-working aristocrats and royalty such as Kate Middleton, who briefly toyed with the image of normalcy by living in a cottage in Anglesey, Wales when first married to Prince William (Shome, 2014: 207).

As with any other commercial enterprise, the wellness industry requires products, personalities and events to sell ideas/dreams/products. This is particularly significant with industries

dependent on the process of "image-making" (Mirzoeff, 1998: 3) and in a society orientated towards visual communication (Mirzoeff, 2015) clean eaters are attuned to the cultural power of the visual and are skilled in the process of crafting the self-image in this "attention economy" (Gill and Scharff, 2011: 2). Representations of these taste creators as ideal white subjects plays a "crucial role in legitimising the restoration and reinvigoration of a regime of power, profit and privilege" (Hall, Massey and Rustin, 2013: 13).

Although Ella Mills claims that "the Deliciously Ella brand is nothing to do with her appearance" (*healthy* 2017: 27), the prevailing message, if you eat what I eat, you too can "achieve a certain body type" (Lau 2000 quoted in Shome, 2014: 200) is conveyed by the October 2017 front cover of *Women's Health* magazine. As described above, Ella Mills was photographed semi-clothed to expose her slim physique and flat stomach. Ella Mills, Jasmine Hemsley and Tess Ward have all modelled professionally, socially valorised positions that reinforce white femininity's existing association with beauty (Shome, 2014: 199; Cole and Sabik, 2009) and in visual media the focus on "the ideal of the Western body type" (Lau 2000 quoted in Shome, 2014: 200) is a commodity with commercial and cultural value (Duffy and Hund, 2015). The images of photogenic bloggers invite and encourage an embrace of self-reliance. The neoliberal project has been successful in producing entrepreneurial identities that has "re-engineer[ed] the bourgeois subject" (Hall, Massey and Rustin, 2013: 20). To explore this articulation of the neoliberal agents, celebrated for their entrepreneurial capabilities, is to gain an understanding of the way in which neoliberal discourses "reproduce existing exclusions along the lines of race and class" (Scharff, 2016: 224).

The emphasis on entrepreneurship in the contemporary context draws attention away from inequality and perhaps it is because we are trained not to dwell on the wealth that groups inherit (Davison and Shire, 2014: 85), or the way in which whiteness works hard to appear as though

it is invisible, that questions of how upper-class white females have dominated clean eating have so far not been addressed.

It is useful to consider Edward Said (1978) in relation to clean eating and his observation that "there is nothing mysterious or natural about authority … it is pervasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value" (Said, 1978: 9). It is a preoccupation of whiteness to construct taste and deliver verdicts of value that is articulated through techniques of white femininity and displayed by upper-class white women, who are exemplars of the neoliberal doctrine, ideal subjects must demonstrate possession of the characteristics that an enterprise society deems desirable; entrepreneurial capabilities that echo distinctly white middle and upper-class aesthetics, values and tastes.

Conclusion

'Eating, Looking and Living Clean' has contributed to the Special Themed Section on Foodwork: Racialised, Gendered, Work and Classed Labours, by bringing whiteness studies and a Black feminist informed approach to the analysis of idealised representations of foodwork, as they appear in the digital, clean eating food trend. The discussion contributes to and addresses the concerns of *Gender, Work and Organization* more broadly by undertaking a critical analysis of neoliberalism; its influence and shaping of healthy eating food advocates in the media and popular culture. Specifically, I have drawn attention to the way in which the language of neoliberalism, now ubiquitous (independence, choice, freedom), works in tandem with the techniques of white femininity to convey visual authoritativeness. The conclusion reached here, is that the representations of upper-class white femininity, reinvented as exceptional food experts, is contradictory, as the message professed is one of inclusion, yet the techniques which are relied upon for clean eaters to appear compelling, are inherently

exclusionary; whiteness as the ideal predominates in these representations of postfeminist new media influencers.

The article is concerned with bringing to bear Black feminist scholarship and intersectional approaches to an area of visual food culture that has thus far received scant attention. Thus, as an area of critical importance to *Gender, Work and Organization*, the feminist knowledge and practice that informs this piece, seeks to advance the journal's critical engagement with intersectional approaches by undertaking a "sustained racialised analysis" (Williams-Forson and Wilkerson, 2011, Kamunge, 2017, Brady et al, 2018 cited in Swan, Perrier and Sayers, 2019) of the visual discourses of white femininities that are advantaged by new labour economies. The intersections of gender, race and class are evident in this food trend that is fronted by young and conventionally attractive upper-class white women. This study of whiteness examines the established aesthetics of white femininity employed by the representatives of this food trend, and calls attention to the intersecting positions of race, class and gender that structure the performances of foodwork in the media.

It is my aim to closely examine that which at first glance appears compelling and not grounded in specific ideologies. Looking closely at images that are all too often taken for granted, close scrutiny makes apparent the need to continuously question the claims of universality, the contrived yet powerful images that focus audience's attention towards notions of a meritocratic level playing field (Littler, 2018), with sophisticated visual language of normalcy and relatability that simultaneously create boundaries around a remodelled neoliberal self as it appears in this recent food trend.

In the analysis of an *Elle Decoration* feature, the visual language of clean eating white femininity is displayed as normalcy, and visual authority. The tightly curated images of clean eating women allow the rhetoric of a neoliberal enterprise society to be embodied in upper-class white females.

In effect, the techniques of femininity that the clean eaters promote, are socially approved by their whiteness to work in tandem with neoliberalism and suggests that their positions can be emulated by making the right choices. I have aimed to stress in the discussion that the choices that the clean eaters speak of are the same as those that appear in neoliberal mantras, and in practice, to make the same choices that the clean eaters have made, requires one to have the resources to start with.

This discussion has aimed to develop an understanding of the cultures of whiteness and affluence that are produced within this conjuncture, and to recognise the techniques and methods that train us to accept whiteness through its outputs and values that are disseminated through popular food culture.

Notes

[1] Scientific research debunks the claim that milk is an acid producing product: See Fenton, T. R. and Lyon, A. W. 2011. 'Milk and acid-base balance: proposed hypothesis versus scientific evidence' https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22081694 National Centre for Biotechnology Information, US.

[2] The Australian food blogger Belle Gibson was found to have made fraudulent claims that her diet had cured her cancer.

[3] It should be noted that there has been tension between food journalists and food bloggers as "criticism of food bloggers as information sources is a theme in journalistic treatments" (Cox and Blake, 2011: 208).

[4] See also Sarah Marsh and Dennis Campbell (2016) 'Clean eating can be dangerous for young people, experts warn', *Guardian* Saturday 1 October https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/oct/01/clean-eating-trend-dangerous-young-people-food-obsession-mental-health-experts

[5] https://www.telegraph.co.uk/food-and-drink/features/deliciously-ella-clean-eating-backlash-family-tragedy-surprising/

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