

"And suddenly it's no longer just about a cookie"

Sugar as a subject of discussion in online parent forums

Tina Bartelmeß

Abstract

The social debate around children's sugar consumption has found its way into everyday discussions among parents. In this study, sugar discussions in online parent forums were analysed to identify parents' everyday cultural concepts of sugar in children's diets. The results indicate that parents' discussions about sugar in their children's diets focus less on health promotion than on the negotiation of parental identity, authority, and control, as well as on assumptions about the influence of food parenting styles on children's opportunities to participate in the respective food culture. Throughout the different stages of childhood, parents are exposed to various challenges in which they must continuously legitimise and adjust their food parenting practices. The results of the study provide implications for nutrition research, communication, and education.

Keywords: parents, sugar, food parenting practices, child nutrition, subjective health concepts, online discussion forums, food sociology, food culture

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Corresponding author

Jun.-Prof. Dr. Tina Bartelmeß
Junior Professor for Food Sociology
Faculty of Life Sciences: Food, Nutrition and Health
University of Bayreuth, Campus Kulmbach
Fritz-Hornschuch-Str. 13, 95326 Kulmbach/Germany
tina.bartelmess@uni-bayreuth.de

Introduction

In all societies, certain cultural beliefs shape how to engage with potential risk factors for health. In recent decades, sugar has attained the status of a "risk factor" for health through scientific and health policy discourses on nutrition in affluent countries [1].

Particularly children come into focus: according to data from the KIGGS Wave 2, in Germany about 15% of children aged 3 to 17 are overweight and almost 6% are obese [2, 3]. From a nutritional science perspective, sugar is regarded as a significant risk factor for obesity, as the consumption of sugary foods and beverages may quickly lead to a positive daily energy balance [4]. Moreover, it is scientifically discussed that excessive consumption may also promote the development of other diseases, such as caries, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases [5].

As a scientific and nutritional policy goal, the reduction of sugar consumption by children and adolescents is therefore highly relevant and ought to be achieved through public health measures, above all, through situational prevention [6–8]. In the course of the socio-political discourse and the implementation of corresponding public health measures, the subject of sugar is also increasingly entering private discussions among parents, especially mothers, who still bear the main responsibility for children's nutrition in private households [9]. All around sugar, cultural concepts emerge among parents who are supposed to take responsibility for the nutritional care of their children and socialise them into a healthy diet [10]. These include not only ideas and beliefs about what positive or negative impacts sugar consumption can have on children's health and behaviour, but also how the management of sugar in food parenting practices affects children's overall development and their future relationship to food [11, 12]. As this study shows, the everyday cultural concepts around sugar have a polarising ef-

Forum	Threads	Posts	Number of Users	Time Period
Urbia.de	20	469	231	2008–2021
Hipp.de	4	163	64	2011–2020
Eltern.de	1	970	57	2018
total	25	1,602	352	2008–2021

Tab. 1: Overview of the analysed discussion forums

fect, which, based on sugar-related food parenting styles, create dichotomies in the discussions, such as those between 'good' and 'bad' parents or children with a 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' relationship to food (cf. [13]). Parental discussions and argumentations about sugar in children's diets express how parents position themselves vis-à-vis these dichotomies and show which additional functions they attribute to sugar as a "risk factor" beyond health to legitimise their management of sugar in their children's socialisation.

Research question and interest

The present study investigates the cultural concepts and functional attributions that can be identified in parental forum discussions regarding sugar in children's diets. Understanding the sugar-related cultural concepts of parents provides entry points for communicating and designing measures of nutrition-related prevention and health promotion in such a way that the activities, competencies, and resources established in the parental concepts are addressed and previous measures and discourses can be reflected regarding the reproduction of polarising dichotomies.

Methods

In November 2021, German-language online parent forums containing discussions with the keyword 'sugar' were identified via the Google search engine. Online parent discussion forums provide an empirical pool of data in which written discussions about sugar can be retrieved within certain overarching topics (e.g., nutrition or child rearing) and within a limited parent public [14], characterised by a common interest in the topics discussed or a common task (e.g., nutrition socialisation) [15]. The focus of online forums is on the discussion of content and opinions, commenting on and classifying information that is relevant to the respective forum or to the discussants [16].

Out of the approximately 150,000 records of the search engine, the first 100 hits were screened, and relevant forums and threads¹ were selectively identified until a theoretical saturation regarding the research question was obtained (see e.g. [17]). Selection criteria were the topic focus in the threads as well as the variance within discussions concerning the age groups of children. Threads in which the subject matter of the discussions drifted off the sugar topic were excluded [14]. Discussions of parents referring to children of different age groups were intentionally

included and, in addition to specific 'baby forums', general 'parent forums' and threads on the overall topic of 'day-care and kindergarten children' or 'school children' were thus also included. Overall, three forums with a total of 25 threads² and 1,602 posts were selected (♦ Table 1). These are a forum of a baby food manufacturer (hipp.de) and two forums run by a family editorial department of a media publisher (urbia.de and eltern.de). The threads were imported into a project file in MaxQDA (version 2022) using the MaxQDA Web Collector (version 2020).

The data was analysed using content and semantic structuring approaches as well as by typification regarding the age groups of the children discussed by the parents in the forums [18]. Besides formal categories, such as the start and end dates of the discussions or the number of user posts, the coding was mainly performed inductively based on the content of the material. Thus, for example, inductive categories were derived from the material on the social role designations and constructions of the parents in the differentiation between supporters ('hypochondriacs') and rejecters ('sugar junkies') of a sugar consumption restriction. Particularly these inductive categories revealed the dichotomous character of the discussions and the polarising and positioning discussion among the parents. Furthermore, deductive theory-based categories were applied to extract the cultural health concepts and the parents' functional attributions of 'sugar' from the data, supplemented with inductive categories, and subsequently complemented with interpretative analyses. Typification of the individual and collective meanings of 'sugar' with regard to food parenting practices and children's health in different age groups could ultimately only be elaborated through comparative analysis of the previously content- and semantically structured material.

¹ In their prototypical structure, online discussion forums are divided into several mostly topic-related discussion threads.

² The threads were called, for example, 'At what point can kids be given a little sugar?', 'sweets' or 'arguments for a sugar-free diet' on urbia.de; 'baby cookies and other', 'semolina porridge with sugar' or 'in-laws and chocolate' on hipp.de; and 'sugar-free diet' on eltern.de.

	Infants	(Day-care) Toddlers	(Kindergarten-)Children	School Children
Position	Poison vs. inevitable	Negotiation of power	Reduction of control	Educational subject
Quote	"Ooops. And suddenly it's no longer about a cookie. As with so many other things, it's about to turn into a political issue." (Hipp.de-Forum)	"Serena now mummy is going to scold grandma again, look I brought you some chocolate!" (Urbia.de-Forum)	"With every year that your child gets older, it's out of your hands anyway if she eats normal sugar somewhere else." (Urbia.de-Forum)	"For the sake of a really healthy diet, such things should also be studied in biology or chemistry." (Eltern.de-Forum)
Function	Finding parental identity	Ringling in a new era	Participating socio-culturally	Supplying energy
Quote	"My daughter is almost 10 months old and has already been allowed to lick my ice cream. I'm a bad mother." (Urbia.de-Forum)	"My little one (now 15 months) was pointing at other people's plates, so I knew it was time to give her some of those, too." (Urbia.de-Forum)	"The terrible abandonment is an ice cream in summer when everyone else is eating one. Or the piece of cake on the birthday." (Eltern.de-Forum)	"And it's not detrimental to the brain at all if there's a decent and readily available portion of glucose in it." (Eltern.de-Forum)

Tab. 2: Cultural concepts and functional attributions regarding sugar in the diet of children of different age groups by the parent discussants

Results

The discussions in parents' forums about sugar in children's diets address many thematic aspects that go far beyond sugar as a foodstuff as well as children's nutrition and their nutrition education. It is apparent that the threads usually begin by discussing individual aspects, such as the sugar content of a certain food or a problematic individual case and are then followed by intensive discussions and polarising argumentations. Thereby, references are drawn frequently to the scientific sugar discourse, individual aspects are reinterpreted, and partly divergent experiential and everyday knowledge of the parents is added. In the course of the discussion, this parental knowledge is classified by the participants in the sugar discussion of a thread on the basis of the dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' and thus simultaneously produces social constructions of different parental nutritional responsibility models. Parents' legitimations of their management of sugar mostly refer to descriptions of individual food parenting styles, which are classified into dichotomies in mutual reference to the descriptions of the other participants in the discussion. The legitimisation of individual food parenting styles often extends to barriers and prevention and health promotion measures in the surrounding socio-cultural and socio-political dimensions. Thus, in the parents' descriptions, references are made to institutional prevention and health promotion measures, such as 'sugar-free forenoon' in kindergarten or 'sugar-free school cones', and their own actions are legitimised, or the actions of others are questioned based on the discussion about their meaningfulness.

By structuring the material into discussion strands that refer to sugar consumption in certain age groups of children and analysing them comparatively, four overarching everyday cultural concepts and functional attributions in relation to sugar in children's diets could be typified. The four concepts relate to sugar in infant diets, in the diets of (day-care) toddlers, (kindergarten) children and school children (♦ Table 2). The identified concepts show that sugar in children's diets occupies a different position in parental practices, beliefs and health concepts over the age

course and thus different functions of sugar are brought into focus in the respective age groups.

Sugar in the diet of infants

In the discussions about sugar in infant diets (up to the age of about 1 year), it emerges that sugar predominantly either takes the position of a 'toxic substance' from which infants are to be protected for as long as possible, or is seen as something 'unavoidable' with which a person comes into contact at some point during his or her life anyway. In the everyday cultural concepts of parents who generally evaluate sugar negatively, technical knowledge about different types of sugar and their health effects is often attached and everyday knowledge in the form of preparation techniques and feeding practices is incorporated. It becomes apparent that the sugar discussions are very polarising, especially regarding infants – the discussion of the appropriateness of individual foods, such as baby biscuits, quickly turns into a 'political issue', dividing parents and constructing ideas of 'good' and 'bad' parenting and taking responsibility. Therefore, sugar takes on the function of an object of negotiation of parental identity for parents with children in this age group. The parental management of sugar in infant nutrition indicates whether parents position themselves as 'extreme sugar ban fanatics' and 'health-conscious-responsible' parents or as 'relaxed' parents, who in the discussions are often ascribed the role of 'bad, unreflective' parents and 'bad mothers'.

Sugar in the diet of (day-care) toddlers

Regarding toddlers, the focus is placed more on the management and regulation of sugar consumption by other primary and secondary socialisation agents besides parents. Sugar becomes an object of power negotiation over parental authority in nutritional matters for parents with children of day-care-age (between 0.5/1 and 3 years). The identities and associated practices that have been formed and consolidated during infancy can no longer be fully implemented due to external socialisation pressures and must be defended or adapted in the face of deviating external expectations. Grandparents, but also relatives and siblings, as well as day-care centres and educators, come to the fore, and by giving children access to sugary foods, sovereignties over children's nutrition are negotiated.

For parents who are no longer entirely committed to sugar restriction in the day-care phase, sugar takes on the function of ringing in 'a new era'. Due to the increase in care outside the family household and the increase in external influences and socialisation instances, children are increasingly granted access to sugary foods and dishes. Everyday nutritional care and socialisation is now no longer solely the responsibility and control of parents. Even the definitions of edible and non-edible sugary foods are no longer based solely on parental or physiological-developmental criteria, but increasingly incorporate social and cultural norms of the wider social environment. Toddlers gain socio-cultural experience and learn food-related social conventions and meanings in relation to specific occasions. Family and socio-cultural meanings are set and consolidated with sugary foods (such as sweets at St. Nicholas or family celebrations). Sugar-concerned parents with children in this age group sometimes develop new preparation practices for everyday and special meals (e.g., for birthday cakes) and look for advice in forums to mark socio-cultural occasions related to sugary foods with new 'sugar-reduced or sugar-free' meanings (e.g., exotic fruit instead of sweets in Father Christmas boots).

Among parents with children in the toddler phase, discussions and evaluations of prevention and health promotion measures in day-care centres often come to exaggerations regarding certain foods that historically have not been assigned to the category 'sugar-loaded'. It becomes apparent at this point that the discussions come to a climax at linguistic peculiarities. The use of terms, such as calling bananas

a sweet or naming the correct types of sugar and their physiological effects, intensifies the assessment of prevention and health promotion measures, such as 'sugar-free forenoon'. Likewise, the assessment of parental nutritional competencies and the polarising constructions and dichotomies of food parental practices in relation to sugar consumption are intensified in this phase. These discussions, for example, speak of parents as 'anxious control freaks' on the one hand and 'sugar junkies' on the other, depending on how much professional expertise they bring into the discussion and how much emphasis they place on sugar in their parenting and preparation practices.

Sugar in the diet of (kindergarten) children

For children of kindergarten age, the exclusive control of parents is increasingly diminishing. Children eat more often outside the home and together with other socialisation instances. In addition, they increasingly participate independently in social occasions, such as birthday parties of their peers, even outside an institution such as the day-care centre or kindergarten. In this phase, the consumption of sugary foods and meals largely takes over the function of socio-cultural participation for the children – discussions often mention the 'fear of exclusion of sugar-free children'. Especially about the kindergarten phase, warnings are expressed in the two previous phases on the grounds of experiential knowledge. It is reported of 'plagues at every child's birthday party', of children who 'break free from the control of their parents' and 'do not know how to deal with high-sugar foods properly'. The argumentations of parents, who from infancy onwards have a rather unconcerned management approach to sugary foods, dominate these discussions. It seems as if there is nothing to counter the experiential knowledge about the behavioural consequences of highly sugar-regulated children. A few arguments of the sugar-concerned parents are founded on the descriptions of individual cases in which children intuitively reach for the 'healthier' alternative even despite the offer of sugary foods. Individual parent discussants adopt the argumentation patterns of sugar-unconcerned parents, but instead of focusing on sugary foods, which seem to mark special occasions, they focus on the special features and social functions of, for example, children's birthday parties. According to this, it is not important for children whether a cake is sweetened with sugar or, for example, an apparently healthier alternative if eating the cake per se is perceived as something special.

The new dichotomy that appears in this phase thus distinguishes between social isolation and participation through sugar avoidance or consumption by the children. The understanding of the concept of health is expanding and, in addition to nutritional aspects, participation in the food culture for a healthy life is gaining greater significance in the discussions. Children who must abstain from sugary foods, as the reasoning suggests, experience 'renunciation' and 'denial' or even must compromise their 'quality of life'.

Sugar in the diet of school children

Concerning school children, the position of sugar in discussions is in flux – parents increasingly consider sugar as a subject of education. Accordingly, the responsibility of the school as an institution is to impart specialised knowledge about sugar and a balanced diet. In this phase, sugar mainly fulfils the function of an energy



supplier for the learning children. For parents, the sugar content of individual foods and dishes no longer seems to be a priority, which is particularly evident in the fact that measures to regulate sugar consumption on the part of the school or teachers, especially concrete food-related breakfast guidelines, e.g., for the lunch boxes, are largely rejected and negatively evaluated by parents. Often, such measures are described as an invasion of privacy and as an attack on parental care practices. The classification of specific foods, whose sugar content is not obvious, into 'good' and 'bad' foods or the external evaluation of the suitability of specific foods for a healthy snack at break time seems to be particularly critical. In the discussions about sugar consumption by school children, arguments such as 'hunger' are now being used by parents for the first time and invoked as a basis for legitimising the provision of certain foods to children.

It seems that there is now convergence between the previously dichotomous expressions among the parenthood and views are converging that primarily consider a balanced diet to be conducive to health. The dichotomous classification of food and meals by the instances of school or teachers creates resistance among parents. 'Health-conscious' parents in particular feel criticised in relation to their home-prepared meals that resemble or are identical to sugary foods (e.g., muffins) in shape and appearance, and do not consider them to be sugary meals just because they are home-prepared.

Discussion

The present study demonstrates that the 'risk factor' sugar is controversially discussed in parent forums and uncovers dominant dichotomies and argumentation patterns of the parent discussants [1, 13]. Different ideas crystallise about how sugar should be managed in children's diets. This study particularly highlights the perspectives of parents, pointing to their focus on the presumed consequences of their sugar parenting practices for children's healthy relationship to food and for good parenting. The identified everyday cultural concepts point to the challenges parents face in today's food parenting and in terms of food discourses as they are currently practised in society [11].

Various implications can be derived from the results for nutrition research, nutrition education, and food communication.

- In infancy, when parents establish their food parenting practices and form identities, there is a high level of uncertainty and a lack of knowledge about how these will affect children's relationship to sugar and nutrition in the long term, and subsequently their health outcomes. The claims about the effects on children's behaviour are solely based on the parents' experiential knowledge. In many cases, nutritional behavioural objectives are formulated and based on experiential knowledge it is evaluated whether the objectives are achieved through corresponding food parenting styles – usually by referring to subjective evaluations (e.g., 'my children have not become fat or sick through sugar consumption'). Long-term interdisciplinary studies on food parenting practices, children's behaviour and the health effects of sugar consumption are required, which would provide a foundation for argumentation and decision-making and could thus

replace the heterogeneous parental experiential knowledge. To date, there also exist no scientific concepts that could be used to measure as a positive variable whether, in addition to health goals, other nutrition goals are achieved at different stages of the food socialisation process – overall, discourse focuses on a biomedical understanding of health [19] and a differentiated approach to food socialisation goals in different age groups is lacking [12].

- In toddlers, grandparents in particular pose a challenge to food parenting practices. Grandparents, who seem to act either on the basis of experiential knowledge or outdated professional knowledge, according to parenting discussions, promote high-sugary eating practices among children and often confer emotional and social meanings on sugary foods. It is therefore imperative to deliberately consider grandparents as a target group of food communication, to reduce children's sugar consumption.
- At kindergarten age, when parental control diminishes, parents often face the challenge of leaving sugary foods in children's recognition as something extraordinary. Children encounter sugary foods more frequently and the boundaries between the special and the everyday become blurred. At this point, more strategies of food communication could support parents striving to mark special occasions as such without high-sugar foods. Overall, nutrition education should also clearly emphasise that health promotion aims not to eliminate sugar from children's diets, but to focus on the healthy use of foods rich in sugar and a balanced diet [11]. To prevent uncertainty among parents and institutions, it seems necessary to clearly name the foods and define the types of sugar whose intake should be reduced. Furthermore, it seems essential to address the network of socialisation actors so that the socialisation instances are perceived as collectively and not individually responsible (cf. [20]). In this way, nutrition and sugar can possibly recede from the centre of defining criteria for good parenting and conflicts with other agents of socialisation may be defused.
- Finally, it is of central relevance to place a stronger focus on school children. Not only through preventive measures, but above all by supporting nutrition education from school enrolment at the latest, to strengthen and promote children's personal responsibility and decision-making ability [21].

Limitations

In contrast to other internet-based communication platforms with a limited number of characters (such as Twitter or Instagram) that may be relevant to the topic, communication by means of textual discussion postings in internet forums is characterised by communication partners usually referring directly to a previous posting with a formal rhetoric of justification and thus mutually developing their argumentations without character limitations [22]. The discussion of sugar-related food parenting styles identified in the data, resulting in dichotomies, might be attributable to this communication format and might not be as polarising in other communication contexts. However, the analysis of this so-called 'incidental' communication [16] has the advantage that the data are non-reactive [21]. They provide insight into the everyday experiences of the discussants, their legitimization of action and their subjective experience [23]. It can be assumed that especially those parents interested in the topic anyway engage in corresponding forums and discussions. In the analysis of internet-based communication, however, no interaction occurs in the situation of data collection [17, 16]. No additional data can be collected that would, for example, provide information about the socio-economic status, the household structure, or the family forms of the discussing parents. The conclusions in this study about, for example, the age of the children in the parents' discussions or the gender of the communicators are therefore only deduced from the conversations in the analysed forums. Furthermore, based on this analysis, no deductions can be drawn about the forms and patterns of relationships between the parents discussing in the forums. Forum-based communication furthermore lacks non-verbal communication and reactions, so it allows for a wider scope of interpretation of the connotative meaning. Moreover, online communication provides the communicators with a high degree of control over their self-representation and self-disclosure, so that it cannot be reliably assessed whether the communication corresponds to the actual everyday actions, intentions, and opinions of the discussants.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Jun.-Prof. Dr. Tina Bartelmeß

Junior Professor for Food Sociology
Faculty of Life Sciences: Food, Nutrition and Health
University of Bayreuth, Campus Kulmbach
Fritz-Hornschuch-Str. 13, 95326 Kulmbach/Germany
tina.bartelmeß@uni-bayreuth.de

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