

# **A fitting ‘social model’: culturally locating telemadres.com**

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## **Abstract**

Telemadre.com is a web site that represents what its producers call a ‘social model’, by which, for a fee, unemployed mothers cook meals for young professionals who do not have time to cook for themselves. In this paper we analyse this ‘social model’ as a mediated relationship that is related to existing strands of contemporary Spanish culture and society. Drawing from existing ethnographic research and an analysis of the website itself we suggest the success of telemadres.com lies in 1) the ambiguous line it draws between (fictive) kinship and economic transaction, 2) its cultural embeddedness in diverse contemporary and traditional Spanish understandings of gender roles, expertise and knowledge, and 3) the mediated nature of the social relationships it entails.



Figure 1: ‘*Telemadre* is a social model of exchange that connects unemployed mothers with people who want to eat well but do not have time or facilities for cooking’ (<http://www.telemadre.com/index2.htm>).

Telemadre.com is a web site that represents what its producers call a ‘social model’, by which unemployed mothers cook meals for young professionals who do not have time to cook for themselves. After coming to an economic agreement, usually by telephone, the *telemadre* (telemother) cooks a pre-arranged number of meals per week, which she packages in Tupperware containers and sends to her *telehijos* (telechildren) by taxi along with written notes. Since the launch of telemadre.com in February 2002 the *telemadre* phenomenon has received continuous attention from the Spanish and international press, radio and television<sup>1</sup>.

As such, telemadre.com constitutes a new media artefact that represents a curious interface between 1) different types of media, 2) the guardians of traditional housewifely knowledge and practice and those whose lifestyles and identities do not accommodate it, and 3) economic transactions framed by an idiom of kinship. The web site itself and the individuals, values and practices surrounding it invoke a series of questions about the role of media in setting the agenda for new forms of mediated social relationship, and how such relationships are implicated in and simultaneously constitute knowledge, practice, experience and their meanings in a changing Spanish culture and society. In this paper we examine just one element of this, which constitutes what we see as the first research question in a wider agenda of investigation that takes telemadres.com as a case study through which to examine intergenerational change and transmission of gendered sensory domestic knowledge and practice, and associated gendered roles, identities and inequalities. Here we analyse the ‘social model’ represented on the web site itself and other the media reports on it, to explain its appeal through an interrogation of its continuities with and departures from the mix of ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ or ‘modern’<sup>2</sup> configurations, values, moralities and experiences that characterise contemporary urban Spain.

Like Woolgar (2002: 2) we are not suggesting new electronic media transform social relationships. Rather by (as Strathern 2002: 203 suggests) contextualising the telemadre.com site in relation to existing themes in Spanish culture and society and other media forms we locate it as part of contemporary shifts in social relationships, cultural knowledge and everyday lifestyles (see Wellman and Haythornwaite 2002, Miller and Slater 2000).

### **The wider context**

Our study is set within the sociological context of a contemporary Spain, which has one of the lowest birth rates in Europe (commonly explained as due to women's entry into the labour market and refusal to relinquish careers for traditional parenting roles, Alberdi 1999, and see Brooksbank Jones 1997: 54). The most recent reports from the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE) show that for the first time in Spain there are now more women than men with higher education qualifications. Moreover small but significant shifts in the domestic division of labour mean men now are doing more, and women less, housework<sup>3</sup>, and public campaigns by the *Instituto de la Mujer* promoting gender equality continue to have a high profile<sup>4</sup>. This changing Spanish culture and society is characterised by a particular configuration of gender diversity. Gender diversity is actually nothing new to Spain since historically Spanish gender, as it is lived, has been plural, representing multiple masculinities and femininities (see for example McClancey 1996, Pink 1997). It was probably never accurately represented by the binary models of gender suggested by anthropologists like Brandes (1981) and Gilmore (1985) and evident in representations of 'tradition' in media and performance genres (see Pink 1997). However, key to the early twenty first century context is the specific nature of this diversity, the new gendered identities that constitute it and the relationships between them. Of particular interest to us here is how since the end of the twentieth century (see Brooksbank Jones 1997 for an analysis of this period) a layer has emerged of young(ish) professionals – women and men – whose working hours and lifestyle priorities combine to leave them little actual or intellectual time for cooking and domestic work. Statistics produced by the *Instituto de la Mujer* show that over all the amount of time spent by Spanish men and women on housework has decreased between 1993 and 2001.<sup>5</sup> These changes and particularly the emergence of the 'young professional' layer are also represented in developments in media culture, fashion purchasing patterns (see Smith 2003) and other areas of production and consumption that form part of these identities.

Parallel to this exists a class of 'unemployed' mothers, women whose children have 'flown the nest' and with no training for other work and few interests beyond home and family are left at a loose end. This group was already targeted in the 1990s by government funded initiatives to expand the social contact and experiences of such women (see Sanchíz 1992) and they continue to be included in women's self-awareness projects (e.g. Martínez Pérez 2000). However there is not only diversity of aspirations and educational and achievement among the younger generation of people who have some degree of career choice, but also in the generation of mothers with grown-up children. Not all housewives are keen to spend their retirement caring for their grandchildren while their own children work or preparing Tupperware containers of traditional food for them to heat up and consume when they are at home. In addition to this with the growth of the aging population in Spain, grandparents in their fifties, sixties and older are also more likely to already be caring for their own aging elderly parents, as part of what has been called the new 'long thin family' (Alberdi 1999). Added to this is the demographic factor of contemporary internal migration within Spain by which we find that an increasing number of working men and women do not live within close travelling distance of their mothers and cannot access their services when they are available for this reason. These factors combine to create a context where 'traditional' family relationships are changing in ways that mean an increasing number of people have no or little access to family support systems and need to access such services from elsewhere.

Telemadres.com makes an explicit connection between two of these groups – the young professionals and the unemployed housewives (although also in receipt of such services might be members of the ageing population and students). However in this paper our intention is not to analyse this as a demographic phenomenon, but to analyse the telemadres.com site in terms of its relationship to contemporary Spanish culture and society and to other media forms by asking a set of questions:

1. What sort of ‘social model’ is the telemadre/telehijo relationship
2. How does the telemadre model fit with existing notions of the mother in Spanish culture and society?
3. What is the relationship between the practices and relationships proposed by telemadre.com and those that exist already within the context of Spanish kinship?
4. How does the model combine the fictive kinship relationship of mother and child with the commercial transaction that underpins it?
5. What is the role of media in this constructed relationship, how is it mediated?

At this stage we draw from existing literature and our own research about Spanish gender in order to produce an analysis that will form the background for ethnographic research that will be carried out later. Therefore this paper is offered very much as a ‘working’ paper, that stands alone because it analyses a particular cultural artefact, but at the same time has been developed as the first step of a wider anthropological study.

### **The telemadre model**

The foundation narrative of telemadre.com, which is represented on-line and in many media reports about the site is as follows. The telemadre web site was set by a group of four young advertising professionals, based in Madrid, who specialise in producing unconventional publicity for businesses<sup>6</sup>. Part of the sociological layer of young professionals identified above, their motive was that they found themselves fed up with having to eat out in restaurants and instead asked one of their own mothers if, for a monthly payment, they would send them prepared meals a couple of times a week by taxi. The mother, Nati García is also represented through her media (newspaper and magazine) interviews as being in need of this relationship. For example, in one Sunday magazine article she is cited as stating:

I am a mother who, like so many others, was widowed young and had to keep going for my 4 children. When they grew up I found myself alone without anything to do, because I’d never worked, and I felt sad and lonely. I’d spent all my life cooking and looking after my children, feeling useful. Suddenly they weren’t there anymore and I got really depressed (*Los Domingos de ABC* 2-6-05: p5)

This successful system which resolved both the need of the young professionals for healthy meals and the mother’s feelings of uselessness and loneliness, also became popular with the founders’ friends and resulted in their setting up the telemadre.com web site.

Its creators stress that the telemadre.com project is not a catering business, agency, or NGO but ‘**a social model**’ (original emphasis). They do not charge commission and have no responsibility for deliveries or payments and do not charge the users of the

site (although advertising space is clearly sold to businesses on the forum pages). Rather the model entails ‘a private agreement between unemployed mothers and people who want, and can afford, a healthy and economical diet’.<sup>7</sup> In this section we outline the ‘social model’ introduced on the website. Keeping in mind that 1) in practice what probably happens is that new forms and relationships develop as users of the site innovate and adapt its possibilities to their own needs, and 2) as we discuss below the term ‘social model’ has been applied by its producers, and itself is part of the ideology constructed by the site.

The telemadre model is that the ‘mother’ (telemadre) and her ‘adoptive children’ (telehijos) come to an economic agreement by which the telemadre prepares an agreed number of meals for her telehijo. On the web site and other media texts her task is represented as to shop for, prepare and cook a previously agreed set of traditional Spanish meals and send them by taxi, in Tupperware containers, to her telehijos. In doing so the telemadre first uses her expert housewifely knowledge to selectively purchase quality ingredients. The telemadre.com site represents this process in interview with the ‘pioneer’ telemadre, Nati García. Here Nati describes her criteria for selecting fruit and vegetables in terms of her visual evaluation of the produce, something that significantly her interviewer cannot ‘see’:

- Nati                    This is fresh – can’t you see how shiny and fresh it is? That orange looks good too
- Interviewer        Because its shiny?
- Nati                    Yes, this one’s rotten, that one’s in a real state, better not get that. When you go shopping, you need to and see what there is. Its not worth buying those mushrooms, they’re ready to be thrown out. Can’t you see that either?
- Interviewer        No
- Nati                    And I wouldn’t put those mushrooms out on the stall

The conversation continues to emphasise the importance of the years of experience that have taught this experienced housewife to judge the quality and juggle this with the price of the goods. This sensory knowledge and evaluation and informs her negotiating skills are not possessed by all, rather it requires the expert vision that forms part of the identity and practice of an experienced housewife.



Figure 2: interview with Nati Garcia, the ‘Pioneer’ telemadre

Such ‘ways of seeing’ are not a natural or essential feminine or personal quality, but as Cristina Grasseni has pointed out such ‘skilled vision’ needs ‘educating and

training in a relationship of apprenticeship and within an ecology of practice' (2004: 41). In the case of telemadre.com the expert vision attributed to the housewife is required to guarantee the authenticity of her motherly work. Her interviewer can be seen as someone who was not only uneducated in this expert vision, but also unengaged in the training it would require. These skills are represented in terms of the sensory category of 'seeing' in the web interview, of course in everyday experience not simply visual, a traditional mother uses her full, embodied sensory cooking skills, sensing heat, texture, smell and taste and using vision and hearing to create an equally sensory culinary experience. Authentic 'traditional' home-cooked food that appeals to her telehijos by evoking visual, gustatory, olfactory and tactile categories of meaning that are connected to culturally and individually specific knowledge, moralities, sentiments, memories and identity narratives (we return to this below). The choice of meals is informed by the telemadres' knowledge about her telehijos' tastes and needs and the state of their fridges, which she monitors through continuous contact with them. This form of care also ensures that the telehijos 'eat well', which implies eating healthy food. In the on-line interview with the 'first follower of the telemadre model' the interviewees note how before contracting a telemadre their eating habits were 'pretty deplorable' but their diet was now much improved, and one of their own mothers, rather than being jealous was simply relieved that at last they were eating well.



**Figure 3:** Interview with 'the first followers of the telemadre model'

The site also offers a model for the economic relationships that might be established, suggesting price structures and also methods of transport and packaging for the meals.

Item	Price
Almuerzo	1.500
Comida	2.000
Merienda	1.000
Desayuno	800
Snack	1.200
Postre	1.000
Bebida	1.000
Paquete completo	6.500

**Figure 4 :** Recommended price structure

Moreover, although its economic component remains clear the transaction is framed by its use of kinship terminology and the implications this has in terms of culturally specific traditional Spanish constructions of the mother-child relationship, notions of care and nurturing. The idiom of kinship as we discuss below, is important (although in practice *telehijos* might also include retired couples who cannot shop and/or cook for themselves). Indeed the very terminology of the ‘social model’ perpetuates this perspective. It is a lay term, used by the project’s authors, not our academic notion. Calling the *telemadre/telehijo* relationship a ‘social model’ forms a very part of the emphasis away from the economic transaction.

As a ‘social model’ the *telemadre* concept offers an alternative to other models of domestic help/work that are already established in Spanish culture and society. The most obvious are: the local Spanish housekeeper who lives in her own home and travels to her employer’s home on a daily basis; and the live-in domestic worker who in the past might have been Spanish but are now increasingly immigrant women. Other parallel models of externally provided domestic services include cleaners and women who take in laundry. The *telemadre* model has themes in common with all of these but in itself seems to be a new model that has developed as a response to a specific social and cultural context.

### **The Spanish Mother/Child relationship**

The *telemadre* as constructed on the web site corresponds well to standard Spanish renderings of the traditional mother, her caring nurturing role and her status as a repository of specialised domestic knowledge. Above we noted how the *telemadre/telehijo* relationship is framed in kinship terminology. To understand the implications of this we first need to consider how this relationship is constituted in Spanish culture. As Peter Schweitzer has put it ‘in order to investigate what is “done” through a particular notion of kinship, at least a preliminary understanding of what kinship is (locally) is necessary’ (2004a: 14). Here the focus is narrow – on one particular aspect of Spanish kinship – the mother/child relationship and the everyday practices and responsibilities that constitute it.<sup>8</sup> Existing literature on Spanish kinship is quite extensive (e.g. Corbin and Corbin 1984, Brandes 1981) partly because in the 1970s analysis of kinship was central to anthropological understandings.<sup>9</sup> Although kinship has since become less fashionable, more recent work demonstrates that combined with gender analysis the study of kin relations remains an important means of understanding contemporary social relationships in Spain. Of particular interest is Jane Fishburne Collier’s ethnography of social change amongst Andalusian villagers between the 1960s and 1980s. During this period (of agricultural decline) She notes a shift in informants’ discourse about economic success ‘from stories of inherited properties to stories of occupational achievements’ (1997: 33). In this situation parenting changed as did values regarding what children should learn, In the 1960s children tended to learn how to be adults by watching and copying adults. By the 1980s in both village and urban contexts parenting emphasised preparing children for their future economic independence from the parental family – largely through schooling (1997: 164). This was particularly significant for the mother–child relationship since mothers were forced with ‘an impossible choice’ if they were to support their children in this project. If a mother remained at home with her children she relinquished her potential ‘to become a self supporting adult’ yet ‘if she kept her job she could not provide her children with the motherly care that children “needed” to realize their potential’ (1997: 169). This form of motherly care also indicates the

scenarios that we see later the ethnography of Spain of the 1990s and 2000's (see Pink 1997, 2004) and in the telemadre.com model. Fishburne Collier describes how in the 1960s 'unmarried girls usually spent their days doing housework for their mothers' – including the cooking – whereas in the 1990s 'many mothers told me they did all the housework in order to leave their daughters free to pursue an education or a paying job (1997: 170). Under these circumstances girls often did not learn to do housework or cook. The resulting scenario is part of the context telemadre.com responds to in the twenty first century: where young adult daughters are not apprenticed in housework and cooking and their mothers have not engaged in paid work (see Fishburne Collier 1997: 171), leaving the 'empty nesters' unfulfilled and unemployed when their children leave home to fulfil *their* potential.

These ethnographic models are also found in other cultural representations. For example Pink's 1992-1994 research about gender and bullfighting culture has shown how the model of the 'traditional mother' constructed in bullfighting culture is of a woman who cares for her son, offering him emotional support and importantly the stability he needs to pursue his dangerous career. When her son is performing she either prays in the bullring chapel or waits at home for his phone call that will tell her he is safe after the performance. Until he finds a suitable 'traditional' wife her role also includes his domestic care, freeing him to follow a tough training schedule. Indeed the same model was repeated for the woman bullfighter Cristina Sanchez in the 1990s. Her mother took charge of domestic affairs to allow Cristina to develop her career (see Pink 1997). These feminine roles are not simply the stuff of late twentieth century ethnographies and classic tales in traditional bullfighting culture, but also the everyday reality of many contemporary women of all ages. For example, when Ana Martinez and the (2000) *A Buen Común* documentary production unit filmed *Mujeres Invisibles* (Invisible Women) the marginalized women who protagonised the documentary stated that they were, above all, mothers. Their discourse was undoubtedly traditional. In some spheres these gendered roles remain uncontested, some women (and men) choose to follow these models and the moralities they imply. The conventions of what might be called 'traditional' culture are confirmed through the everyday practice of many contemporary Spanish people. However there are concurrently many contexts where women depart from these gender configurations and it is here where their constructions of the mother and housewife become more ambiguous.

It is here that we also need to attend to the relationship between kinship, gendered agency and practice. Pink's 1999 research about Spanish gender in the sensory home<sup>10</sup> has shown that an increasingly number of women are departing from the gender roles lived by their mothers, which also entails a rejection of a number of the domestic practices and the domestic knowledge that their mothers employed. Such women tend to construct their mothers as allowing housework to dominate their lives, doing it too frequently and being 'obsessive' about it. As such placing then at them borders of having a life that is 'out of control'. However in turn, they recognise their personal need for their mothers and persons like them who possess the knowledge needed to undertake domestic tasks and cook good authentic healthy meals. Particularly, as is often the case women of this younger generation are not willing to engage with and assimilate sensory domestic knowledge themselves, and therefore depend on their mothers to provide both instructions about how to carry out domestic tasks (but not the epistemology behind this) as well as actual domestic services such

as laundry, ironing, and cooking. Sons who engage in domestic tasks also have similar relationships to their mothers in that they depend on them for domestic advice and some services. However whereas women tend to emphasise their own departures from the feminine identities lived by their mothers by constructing their mothers as 'obsessive', men tended to do so by constructing the feminine sensory knowledge their mothers employed as being 'mysterious' and beyond their comprehension. Representations of the *telemadre* model indicate similar themes. For instance in one newspaper article about *telemadre.com* the journalist notes how Nati García 'tried to teach her son Emilio that the hob and the saucepan were not his enemies' she quotes Nati as joking that 'The first day he did some stuffed onions and of course he tried something so complicated that you could see that it scared him off' (Susana Moreno, *El Pais*, Sunday 12 May 2002: 6).

Sensory elements of these practices were very important. As we have seen in the previous section the 'skilled vision' or expertise of the housewife/mother was not something that had been learnt by the younger woman she conversed with. Similarly Pink found amongst her younger generation of 'independent' informants an unwillingness to engage in the sensory apprenticeship that would have been necessary to achieve the 'mother's' expertise. In both cases women and men used these devices to distinguish their own domestic practices and identities from those of the figure of the mother who traditionally carried out such practices (see Pink 2004). However these 'young professionals' still left space in their models of their mother for a nurturing caring role that was supportive and supposed a degree of continued dependency (see Pink 2003, 2004). In this sense the gendered and sensory practices and knowledge of both mother and child can be interpreted as to some degree (re)defining the nature of mother-child kinship relationships.

The role of food in this dependency is particularly interesting because recent research demonstrates how the gustatory and other sensory dimensions of food can be evocative of 'home', authenticity, caring and other emotions that are embedded in the *telemadre.com* model. The sociologist Deborah Lupton has demonstrated how people tend to remember past food events 'for the social relationships around which the food was consumed' (Lupton 1994:678).<sup>11</sup> Existing anthropological work suggests how sensory aspects of food preparation and consumption can also be evocative of memory, sentiments of home, and the individuals and relationships these imply. For example, Paul Stoller shows how in his fieldwork in Niger (1989: 15-34) his informant cooked a tasteless meal as a means of expressing her frustrations with her domestic situation. Nadia Seremetakis's (1994) work on rural Greece has shown how food and its sensory qualities can be evocative of culturally and historically specific and personal memories and. But perhaps the most relevant example is Elia Petridou's (2001) study of the culinary practices of Greek overseas students in London shows how the preparation of Greek food using imported ingredients along with prepared food brought from Greece on visits home and received in (in one case twice weekly) parcels by post is used to evoke home through a combination of the senses (2001: 88-91). Importantly for Greek students the process of preparing and the taste of Greek food evoked the concept of 'caring' that is integral to a particular form of domestic morality that they found lacking amongst English families (2000: 94-6) but is fundamental to the Greek concept of the housewife. Comparing the (artificial) visual appearance and (lack of) smell and taste of British ingredients and cooked food with their Greek equivalents Petridou's informants contrasted the British 'uncaring' and

practical approach to food with the ‘tasteful food of the Greek home, cooked and prepared by people who *care*’ (2001: 98).<sup>12</sup>

Drawing from this existing work we can see how the ‘traditional’ mother and housewife retains an important role in Spanish culture and traditional models of mother-child domestic dependency endure in slightly new forms as new gendered identities emerge. If we add to this the idea of food as a medium through which notions of caring, housewifeliness and motherhood can be communicated, the potential of the telemadre/telehijo relationship to evoke these sentiments is clear and is part of the context highlighted above of the ambiguity of non-housewives’ constructions of the Spanish mother. Further to this another example of how the ambiguous status of the housewife/mother is both evident and overlooked was the reception of the premier screening of Martinez’ *Mujeres Invisibles*. When the film was shown at the opening of a feminist conference the subjectivity of its protagonists, that represented a ‘traditional’ form of feminine struggle, was also recognised by the audience of 4,000 Spanish feminists who as the film ended cried out ‘Long live the women’s struggle’. In this context of multiple feminine subjectivities it is clear that different women live out their feminine identities in ways that are at the very least contrasting, and sometimes compete for moral validation. Yet in the lived experience of this diversity it is also evident that ‘traditional’ feminine roles and those that depart from them are mutually interdependent. For example, a ‘mother’ needs to care for her child in order to live out her identity through her everyday practice. Her daughter might well reject her mother’s values and reality but needs her services and knowledge to be able to maintain the identity that *she* in turn lives through a different set of practices.

### **Established practice and the idiom of kinship**

Anthropological studies of kinship have shown that it is not unusual for people to gloss economic relationships with the social veneer of ‘the language of kinship’. For example Jenny White has shown how working class urban Turkish women home-workers are able to draw in resources by using ‘fictive’ kinship. In particular she shows how “‘Fictive’ kinship’ has provided a ‘model for relationship of production between home-workers and home-work distributors producing for export’. In this case the use of fictive kinship allows these women to express their piecework labour as ‘an expression of their social role...rather than “work for pay”’ (White 2000: 124). One of the consequences of the framing of these economic relationships of inequality in terms of social relations and obligations of kinship is that it ‘requires that relationships of domination appear natural’ (2000: 148) as such obscuring the very inequalities that brought it about. Representing what Schweitzer calls an ‘inclusive’ kinship strategy (2000b: 211-13) – which the case studies in his edited volume show often link kinship with economics – White’s study demonstrates well what people can *do* with kinship. In this section we outline why the telemadre.com model engages a similar strategy. The use of kinship terminology to define the model for the telemadre/hijo relationship works at several levels. Both parties engage in practices that explicitly reference characteristics of the conventional mother and adult child relationships in Spain, described above, which are embedded in Spanish household structures that endure in new forms in a changing society.

In Spain it is not unusual for unmarried adult children to remain living in or attached to their parental home (and to renew this residency or attachment on divorce or the

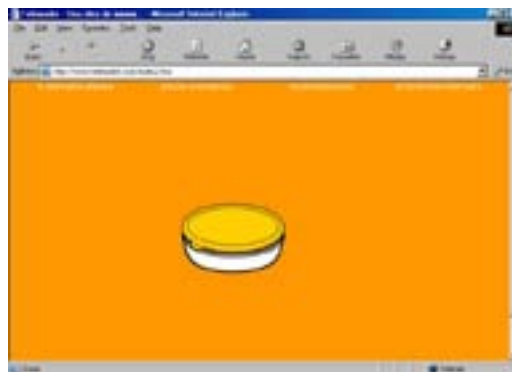
break-up of a relationship, see Alberdi 1999). In Sarah Pink's previous fieldwork (1992-1994 and 1999) she found various scenarios. In some cases married sons retained some degree of dependency on their mothers. For example, Lola a housewife in her fifties cooked lunch everyday for her married son who worked in a nearby village, and sometimes also for his wife and their son. When adult sons still living at home worked away from the parental home it was common on their weekend visits for them to leave with a set of Tupperware containers of prepared home-cooked meals to be reheated from Monday to Friday, to be returned and re-filled by their mother the following weekend. This occurred even in cases of sons who lived relatively independently in their own homes. For example Javier, a teacher, who was in his early thirties and had recently bought his own city apartment lived about an hour's drive from his parental home. Unlike both the model *telehijo* and the attached sons described above, he had a new kitchen in his own home, usually cooked for himself every day and sometimes invited friends over for dinner but he commented

Javier ...every time I go and see my family, my mother gives me food. So I bring it home and freeze it, then one day when I'm going to eat whatever, I take it out and heat it up. When I go there, my mother normally has something prepared for me.

Sarah Some mothers do carry on doing that, don't they.

Javier Here they do, they like it, they enjoy it.

Women also reported similar patterns of dependency on their mothers, especially working women living not in but near their parental home, saying they had little time, or enthusiasm for shopping or cooking they ate most of their meals at their mother's homes. In these cases their mothers were represented as good and 'traditional' cooks, concerned with domestic matters. For example Marta also in her thirties had dinner at her parents' home every evening because once she had got home from her full time job she didn't 'have time' to prepare her own meals. In these and other cases informants were keen to differentiate between their own and their mothers' domestic practices more generally with reference to housework routines and standards and personal priorities. Although they did not wish to invest in developing their own 'traditional' housewifely skills and knowledge, or using this to inform their own practice, the attributes, usually invested in the figure of their own mother remained important to them as a resource that could be drawn from.



**Figure 5:** Telemadre.com dedicates an animated page to the use of Tupperware for transporting food

In this context the use of kinship terminology, and the use of the material culture of maternal food supplies – the Tupperware containers – to refer to the relationship between telemadres and telehijos is significant. It can be seen to evoke aspects of a conventional kinship relationship. If we return to the ideology of the web site, that constructs telemadres as housewives who find themselves at a loose end because their children have left home and telehijos as lacking the domestic structure, time and skills to cook traditional food and healthy, this relationship benefits both as it ‘fills the gap’ in their lives that ‘would have been’ filled by ‘real’ parents and children.

### **Commercial transaction**

While certain aspects of the telemadre model evoke traditional mother/child relationships and dependencies, the telemadre model is founded on an economic agreement and is a commercial transaction. There are various ways to interpret the economic dimension of the relationship between telemadres and telehijos. In the on-line interview with the ‘first followers of the telemadre model’ the interviewees describe their relationship with their telemadre as follows:

Well, she thought it was really good because she’s a housewife whose children have all left home, so the poor thing’s a bit bored because she’s used to working for lots of people. And she was really happy because it was the first time she’d ever been paid a salary in her life, she’d never earned any money, and part from that it keeps her busy. She thinks its wonderful.

However despite the niceties of references to kinship and the mutual satisfaction that each might derive from the relationship, this relationship is an economic transaction in which one party advertises and provides a service the other pays for. While defining the relationship as economic does not mean that the relationships formed through the web site do not also provide mutual satisfaction, the economic nature of them must not be subdued as it raises a set of additional issues. For instance the essence of the ‘social model’ is historically grounded in the creators of telemadres hiring their own mothers to cook for them, thus establishing telemadres and hijos as social equals. However some of these relationships are formed on the basis of seeking economic gain and rooted in economic inequalities. For example one telemadre is a man – Juan Carlos Acebo from the Basque town of Santurtzi, ‘Spain’s first *telepadre* or web dad’ The BBC News web site reports that ‘He read about the idea in a magazine and did not hesitate to get involved. "I work shifts," he told Spanish TV. "I have quite a few days free in the week, so if I can fit things in and get a chance to get extra money, then I'm all for it."' (‘Spain’s Cyber-mums dish it up’ BBC news on-line 12th November 2002). Moreover some of the media representations portray the telemadre.com project as an economic proposition, flagging up in headlines that a telemadre can earn €360 a month (e.g. *Capital*, Julio 2002, p98), while usually qualifying this with an emphasis on the fulfilment that the telemadre gains through her renewed motherly role (e.g. Ane Urdangarin ‘Madre si hay más que una’ in *Al Dia* 16 Junio 2002. p5). We must keep in mind that unemployed housewives (classified as such from 65 years onwards) receive at the most a pension of € 400 (per month), with which is clearly insufficient in a big city like Madrid<sup>13</sup>. In this sense the example has clear parallels with White’s case study outlined above. The use of the ‘inclusive’ (Schweitzer 2000b: 211-13) kinship idiom obscures economic inequalities by framing the economic transaction in terms of a social and moral relationship.

Another basis upon which to understand the economic aspect of the relationship is by asking what exactly is being bought and sold. The use of the *telemadre/hijo* terminology also refers to a relationship between those who do and those who do not possess housewifely knowledge and perform everyday sensory practices that are informed by it. This relationship is also characterised by the ‘othering’ and rejection of the housewife role by those who do not want to perform it themselves which is tempered by their respect for and perceived need of the methods (if not epistemology) and results of the practices housewifely knowledge informs. As Pink’s 1999 study of constructions of the Spanish housewife at the end of the twentieth century shows, those men and women who reject the role of housewife themselves, yet engage in their own practices of housework construct her in ways that reject her lifestyle and morality yet value her as a source of expert solutions to practical domestic problems, thus giving the Spanish housewife an important place in contemporary culturally specific constructions of gender and gender diversity (Pink 2004). This circuit of difference, othering and respect, applied to the *telemadre/hijo* relationship suggests the *telehijo* is not simply buying a domestic service but is actually buying a resource of respected and specialised experience and knowledge that she or he does not possess. For some informants in Pink’s study this was even a form of knowledge that was ‘mysterious’, something they claimed they ‘did not understand’. By constructing the relationship between the *telemadre* and *telehijo* in terms of 1) difference regulated by abilities to access and apply specialised knowledge and 2) mutual interdependencies that entail not just the provision of services and products but that ‘fill a gap’ that is couched in terms of the caring, nurturing and sentimental terms of kinship, the social model of *telemadre.com* departs from existing models through which of domestic labour and service is bought.

As such the model of the *telemadre-telehijo* relationship might be said to combine a mixture of both what Hochschild (1983) has called ‘emotional labour’ and what Silva (2000) calls ‘emotional capital’. The former is the emotional work that the service provider carries out, and involves representing and suppressing particular of her/his emotions in order to maintain a particular emotional state in the client (Hochschild 1983: 7). As Sharma and Black point out this tends to be regulated both as part of the strategies that organisations develop to maintain orderly client behaviour. However they also show that for both Hochschild’s research on flight attendants and their own work with beauty therapists it also serves to cultivate customer loyalty – ‘the client must go out feeling that her emotional needs have been met, or she will not make another appointment at that salon’ (Sharma and Black 2001: 925). Emotional labour involves an emotional exchange that takes place as part of a commercial transaction. Hochschild’s flight attendants emotional labour (1983: 6) means ‘the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labour is sold for a wage and therefore as *exchange value*’ within a distinctively capitalist context. When ‘these same acts are done in a private context where they have *use value*’ Hochschild calls them ‘emotion work’ or ‘emotion management’. (1983: 7 note). Private acts can also be seen as what Elizabeth Silva calls ‘emotional capital’ is ‘a capacity to connect, involving acts, intentions, sentiments. It refers to moral thinking about personal connections and intimate lives related to the self and others’ (Silva 2000: 4). The difference is that ‘While a person can use, buy and hire another person’s emotional labour, emotional capital cannot be exchanged in similar ways’. Emotional capital does however (like Bourdieu’s social and cultural capital) have an exchange value, but this is defined on the basis of its being ‘an asset that derives from

personal abilities, connections and investments in and from the self' which means it only has exchange value on particular markets (Silva 2000: 4n5). Hochschild suggests private and public instances of emotional management are however not unconnected, because emotional systems tend to be transmuted which involves the instrumental application in commercial contexts of feelings (usually feminine) we might have privately, perhaps unconsciously (1983: 19-20).<sup>14</sup>

There are sensory aspects of Hochschild's notion of emotional labour. She defines both feeling and emotion as 'a sense, like the sense of hearing or sight', that are experienced 'when bodily sensations are joined by what we see or imagine' – which can occur in both private and commercial contexts (1983: 17). Taking this as a starting point this idea of emotional labour can be adapted to consider it as a form of sensory embodied practice that transmutes culturally specific concepts of private feelings of care and nurture and authenticity that are evoked by/and or invested in particular sensory experiences, into the use of these feelings in a context that is framed by a commercial transaction. Above we noted how the sensory experience of food can evoke the feelings of care and nurture associated with being motherly/housewifely. The work of the Telemadre is different from the face-to-face dimension of the relationship between flight attendants (and beauty therapists as well as other groups of women workers whose practices have been understood in terms of emotional labour). In fact the face-to-face component which is part of Hochschild's definition of emotional labour is largely absent from the Telemadre's work. However she is still engaged in a form of emotional labour that is couched in terms and created through practices similar to those of Silva's 'emotional capital'. Like Hochschild's flight attendants, the telemadre's practices entail the sensory and emotional work that makes a client comfortable. In the case of the telemadre.com model this is mediated emotional labour, mediated through the material and sensory aspects of the food, packaging and accompanying notes that she sends to her telehijos. It is through the sensory experience of the foods that are sent that the feelings of the telemadre implied by her fictive kinship status are authenticated and it is through her creation of these sensory and material products that her emotional labour is articulated and as such her kinship status invoked.

### **Media and telemadre.com**

As the analysis above has revealed the 'social model' involves what we might call a mediated relationship which is not only represented in various media forms (on-line, television, print media) but this fictive kinship relationship develops as a 'virtual' relationship. We do not mean virtual in the sense of the notion of a 'virtual society' expounded in the 1980s and 1990s, whereby electronic technologies 'enable communication via computers (and other electronic technologies) that replaces face-to-face interaction' and people 'spend as much, if not more time in an imaginary virtual work as in their real world' (Woolgar 2002: 2). Instead telemadre.com constructs a relationship in which the parties never meet but communicate through a range of media. Taking McLuhan's broad definition of media that suggests any resource may be seen as a medium that will configure both socio-cultural forms and personal experiences (1964), in this section we analyse how the telemadre.com ideology and the relationships represented on the web site that have been outlined in the preceding sections are mediated by old and new media forms.<sup>15</sup>

As a *hypermedia form* the telemadre.com web site is characteristically built on a database model (Cook 2003) and is multimedia, multilinear and interactive (Pink 2001). As the analysis above has described, it combines written texts of different styles, photographs and animations to represent its ideology and the relationships, material culture, knowledge and practices attached to it. It has links to a database of existing press and magazine reports and the user can contribute to the site her or himself by posting a message advertising or requesting telemadre services to the message board pages. It is at this point that the site also offers individuals the possibility for self-representation, and its construction becomes an on-going process. The web site and the social model it constructs have been the subject of analysis of this article, so we will not dwell any further on its content here, but focus on how the model it represents both implicates and has already actually inspired other media of communication.

As we noted at the beginning of this article since its inception in 2002 telemadre.com has been the subject of continuous *media reports in the national Spanish and international press and on television*. These media reports inter-reference one another as Telemadres interviewed in the press have said they found out about the site through word of mouth, newspapers, magazines and TV/Radio reports. For example 'Conchita Gonzalez, a telemadre from the Basque town of Getxo, heard about the idea from two friends who had seen a media report about it' ('Spain's Cyber-mums dish it up' BBC news on-line 12th November 2002). Moreover many of the press reports are linked on-line to the web site in pdf files. The evidence from these media reports suggests that these telemadres heard about the site from the 'other side' of what has been called the 'digital divide' and then either advertised on-line or responded to telehijo on-line advertisements. Because most advertisements include telephone numbers, rather than e-mail addresses the implication is that new media in fact has a quite specific and limited role in the initiation of the telemadre/telehijo relationship. In fact evidence from the web site and media reports suggests most agreements and orders take place over *the telephone*.

The authenticity of the relationship however is also constructed on the website through the suggestion of another old media form: *the written note*. This is represented visually by a photograph of a written note that has been sent with the food order. On a scrap of paper with tape that would be attached to a Tupperware container, this represents a 'personal' handwritten note in the informal but adequate capital letter writing style one might expect of such an author. The note reads 'Spinach for today. Hope you like it'. It is a domestic note that would be out of place in a commercial context and as such invokes the authenticity of the (tele)mother/child relationship as a domestic nurturing, rather than public commercial transaction. The written note is a medium that could thus deflect our attention from another 'old' medium – *money*.

Within the telemadre model *transport* is another factor that mediates the telemadre/telehijo relationship. As a medium, moreover the taxi is key to the virtual relationship between telemadre and telehijo as it precludes their relationship with has henceforth been mediated by the press or television, internet, telephone and written notes from becoming a face-to-face encounter. Ideally this lack of direct contact should be maintained throughout. Including the return of another message-laden medium - *the Tupperware*. In the on-line interview the telehijos avoid meeting their

telemadre to return the empty Tupperware since they are able to drop them off to a friend for whom the trip is more convenient. In this context Tupperware both perpetuates the notion of motherly nurture – as we discussed above Tupperware containers are commonly used by mothers who produce and package homemade food for their children – but do so in a context where an actual encounter with the ‘mother’ is avoided. However in the context of the telemadre/telehijo relationship their value in evoking this nurturing relationship goes beyond their role as a medium that simply contains *the food* – our final medium.

The telemadre/telehijo relationship is ultimately mediated through the main object of their transaction – the food that is sent from one to the other. The food itself is a medium of communication about the telemadre/telehijo relationship that represents the elements of this relationship discussed in this paper: 1) the authenticity of the fictive kinship relationship – the nurturing role embodied in traditional food which it is conventionally associated with, in this sense the ‘emotional capital’ and caring role the telemadre has as fictive mother; 2) the notion of caring embodied the commercialised emotional labour which the production of food that the telehijo likes will bring about, plus the authenticity of the written notes, all of which should make them want to repeat their order; and 3) the respective expertise of the telemadre and telehijo, the housewifely/motherly knowledge that defines one and that through its absence in the other secures her/his departure from domestic femininity.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has not sought to represent the experienced reality of the telemadre.com phenomenon. Rather it has sought to understand how and why it has been successful through an analysis of the ideologies, knowledge, relationships and practices that are represented on-line on the telemadre web site – as a ‘social model’. It should be clear by now that of course what has been called a ‘social model’ is in fact anthropologically not to be interpreted as such, but rather as a representation of a much more complex and internally diverse set of ambiguous mediated relationships that are based on an economic foundation but simultaneously evoke sentiments of kinship, nurture and care. The appeal of telemadres.com, we suggest lies in its ability to maintain this ambiguity, and in its cultural embeddedness through its continuities with diverse contemporary and traditional Spanish understandings of gender roles, expertise and knowledge.

In itself telemadre.com is a neat anthropological curiosity that sits interestingly at an intersection between what might be called the ‘traditional’ and the ‘new’ in a changing Spanish context. However the preliminary analysis of the web site and media reports suggests its significance as a prism through which to examine generational changes in gendered identities, sensory domestic knowledge and practice in a mediated world goes further. Telemadre.com provides an example of how new and old media forms are embedded in processes of social and cultural change whereby everyday identities, moralities and lifestyles that are at least partially dependent on new forms of mediated ‘virtual’ social and economic relationships. It invites an ethnographic research agenda that will explore precisely how the relationships modelled on the web site are disseminated, appropriated and lived in people’s everyday experiences, the knowledge and practices through which they are articulated, the identities that these constitute and the inequalities they reveal.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Details of media reports on radio, television and in print media (mainly newspapers and magazines) can be found on the [www.telemadre.com](http://www.telemadre.com) site. Google searches reveal further reports in English and commentaries on the site in discussion groups.

<sup>2</sup> The terms 'tradition'/'traditional' have been both crucial to and controversial in anthropological studies of changing Spanish gender and kinship (Fishburne Collier 1997, Pink 1997). Pink found (in 1992 and 1999) fieldwork that Spanish informants and media used 'tradition/al' to refer to sets of behaviour that involved gender role segregation and activities such as bullfighting, flamenco, the *copla* and other local and regional events that correspond with these gender models (Pink 1999, 2004). Likewise Fishburne Collier found that in the 1980s a traditional/modern dichotomy was used to describe informants' past and present (1997: 10-11). In this article tradition/al are not used as anthropological categories that determine and essentialise traditional as opposed to modern ways of doing things. Rather to refer to such local classifications of events and behaviours that Spaniards often see as pertaining to or originating from an existing past, but not relegated to the past. It is frequently acknowledged that traditional roles, behaviours and activities exist in contexts that are considered untraditional. They are as such as much a part of contemporary modernity as the behaviours roles and activities we might label as 'new' or as departures from tradition.

<sup>3</sup> See statistical sources at <http://www.mtas.es/mujer/MCIFRAS/W15.xls>.

<sup>4</sup> For example in video campaigns.

<sup>5</sup> From 1993 to 2001 the amount of time spent by both sexes on domestic work decreased by almost 20 minutes per day. The only areas that increased time was spent on were shopping and family care. From <http://www.mtas.es/mujer/MCIFRAS/W15.xls> (accessed 22 November 2004)

<sup>6</sup> The group - mmmm – is made up of Alberto Alarcón, Emilio Alarcón, Ciro Márquez and Eva Salmerón, see [www.mmmm.tv](http://www.mmmm.tv)

<sup>7</sup> From document supplied by e-mail by one of the founders, Emilio Alcarcon.

<sup>8</sup> Here, following Schweitzer we see kinship relations as being constituted by practice and as indicative of agency rather than being dictated by overarching kinships systems. Our interest is in how people make kinship work for them.

<sup>9</sup> Around that time a series of arguments were developed that challenged the centrality of kinship studies in anthropology in favour of a gender approach (e.g...)

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<sup>10</sup> This project, sponsored by Unilever Research (UK) formed part of a comparative study between Spain and England which is reported on in Pink's book *Home Truths* (2004). The Spanish research included 20 in-depth tape recorded interviews and video ethnography sessions with each informant and was supplemented by further participant observation.

<sup>11</sup> Using a method of 'memory work' developed by social psychologists Lupton explored how Australian students remembered childhood food experiences.

<sup>12</sup> In another case study Anat Hecht (2001) shows how her informant Nan used the taste and smell of food and cooking to evoke her biographical experiences of her childhood home and the mother she subsequently lost.

<sup>13</sup> We are also dealing here with a generation of women who having lived through the post-war years are used to saving money. Many have been able to save enough money to pay the deposits for the houses of their children who have grown up in a consumer society where credit has replaced saving.

<sup>14</sup> On the surface this appears to be an essentialist argument that we have the 'real' private feelings of emotional management and 'phoney' publicly expressed feelings of emotional labour. However Hochschild notes that this represents a search for a 'true self' in a context where this is increasingly hard to find. Linking this to more recent theories of intersubjectivity whereby the self is continuously (re-constituted) through its interactions with others we move on to the philosophical question of if we can locate within this a 'true' essential self – a question to which of course there is no definitive answer in itself (see Rapport's discussion). What however we can say is that it is well recognised that as they pass through different social situations people tend to construct, maintain or guard their identities in ways that they think are appropriate. This involves managing not only emotions, but a full set of behaviours, although this might not always be geared to 'fit in' and can also be used to challenge existing values.

<sup>15</sup> Ultimately our research will explore ethnographically 1) How the relationships themselves appropriate these media forms and 2) How these processes are implicated in producing social change