

"Eatable Media Image"? Food in Culture Industry and the Consumer Culture

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Abstract

Different from the critique of “McDonaldization” this paper focus on: the food consumption itself appears not only for “functionality” but becoming the object of conspicuous consumption. To consider the scarcity of food and to probe into how the group-type cooperation manipulates the media image through displaying the food products, I use the Mennel (1997) idea of the ‘food culture industry’ can mirror the tacit social meaning and the operation of ideology. Moreover, this research based on the concept of Culture Industry theory proved that food consumption evolves into an outcome of Culture Industry and the reflection of individual social context. By analyzing audiences’ experience in food industry, the analysis highlighted those behaviors are grounded on — pursuing ‘shared consumption experience’ , segmental social marker, invisible influence of social context, ineffective media message, floating stylish food products and subjective judgments of behaviors on media image — six facets to decide the practice of ‘food culture industry’.

Keywords: culture industry, food consumption, media image, social marker, consumer agency

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I. Introduction

Nowadays, the consumer life style is a 'trinitarian' that combined with society, culture and consumption. The subjectivity between 'individual' and 'products' is gradually becoming vague; on the one hand, people present their own 'culture capital' by 'consumption behavior'. (Helga Dittmar, 1992) Consumers seem to connect the social power and consumption behavior, by ceremonial, social distinction and social division (Rojek. C., 2005), they are in order to gain self-actualization and self-satisfaction.

The fact consumer society didn't disclose is the results of consumers consuming process also determined the 'self-identity' was built by the 'product-identity' they chose. Therefore, the fact behind the competitive market affording commercial and differentiated products is the capitalism logic controlling the relationship between production and consumption. Which is the concept 'culture industry' reveals, people pursue for the 'customized product' or 'stylish' they are merely the 'mass customization' as a part of post-Fordism. When consumers wants to find representative products for themselves, the producer developed as a grouping system and became highly transitional and replaceable way to keep their existence in consumer society. The capitalism shadowed consumer society as a 'money is everything' society and take segmented market and scarcity for granted. Consumption becomes the struggle between social layers and culture in consumers' mind.

This research based on Mennel(1997) research that consumer society originated from the competition for the deficient resource, by now, consumer society is an outcome of personal capital. People not only seek for physical satisfaction but to satisfy their own social psyche satisfaction. To illustrate the basic concept of the meaning of consumption, people need the 'food' to meet their physical operation needs. Until now, the 'food' distracted from its function as to satisfy physical needs turns out to be the object of social distinction. 'Food culture' also reflects the inequity relationship upon resource allocation and consumers' social economy status and latent social meaning or even the ideology of consumer society. Nonetheless, the cooperation between the media and the market (Lury, 2011) makes 'brands' as visible selling objects. Hence, this research attempted to discover the 'food culture industry' how to being the consumption objects under the food industry association's market operation.

For understanding the 'food culture' as the object of culture industry and its relationship toward media image and social context, this research basically discussed

the essence functionality of daily diets and the consequence of being the conspicuous consumption product. Food culture and consumer society can be obviously found in the social layer construction, representation, reproduction culture, and to know the different meaning of food consumption among social layers. Warde (2000) found the food culture practice by the out-eaters that the symbolic meanings of food culture have extended as the entertainments, representation of consumer taste and the segmentation of social layers. The provision of food involves the financial ability, social status, media information and the allocation of resource. The purpose of this research is to understand whether the consumers yield obedience to food culture industry or have consumer agency in the consumer society.

This research take 'Wang Ping' as research target, before 2002, Wang Ping claimed that 'a cow only served for six set of meal', after 2003 Wang Ping relocated the brands goal to 'only treat the most important people' from an humanity perspective.(Kao, 2012) It shows that Wang Ping used to use the notion 'luxury' to attract their target audience, but now they changed strategies to cater to different level of consumer communities. Wang Ping as a biggest food industry association in Taiwan use the 'multi-brands' with 'multi-food style' to appeal the consumers. Wang Ping can represent for the 'hegemony' party in Taiwan food industry.

II. Culture industry and food culture consumer practice

'Food' becomes the manipulable object and the social context brings its visible transition, such as the appearance of 'creative cuisine', 'exotic dishes'. Or due to the change of lifestyle, personal diet habits changed as well. The number of out-eaters increased brought along the food industry associations. On the other hand, the diet manners, social norms will also influence the consumers' consumption practice. Food culture as an 'symbolic consumption' sphere of culture industry, consumers consumption behavior became irrational and exaggerated to follow the myth that culture industry built and glad to be the subordinate in the consumer society.

Adorno and Horkheimer raised the issue 'Culture Industry' theory, they take the products in mass society were contained with ideology. Classic Marxism thought 'false consciousness' was the exploitation relation between superstructure and the base. Culture industry theory took another way to view the 'false consciousness'; it indicates that 'consciousness' was embedded in the 'production-consumption' circulation process. Culture industry theory viewed consumers (audience) as passive role in consumer society. This research appointed the Gramsci's concept of

‘hegemony’. That ideology is to maintain the interests of ruling group, on the other hand, culture industry uses the standardized products and the inactive social value to the successfully embodied the consumers.

Food culture as part of consumer society must relate to social and culture. Wills(2011) used the notion ‘habitus’ discovered food could be recognized as ‘functionality’ and ‘form’ for representing the audiences’ social layer. Not only that, this research get Schouten(1991), Warde(2008), Wills(2011) and Backett-Milburn(2010) research results together, to deliberate the role of ‘persuade the shared experience’, ‘consumption as social marker’, ‘ritual consumption behavior’ and ‘social level division’ in the food culture consumption.

The theoretical foundation is shown as figure 1.

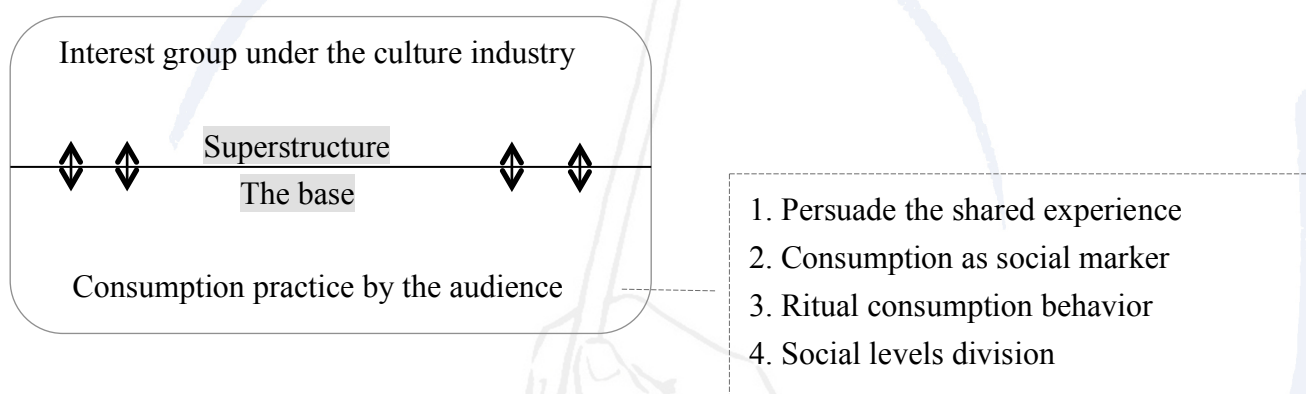


Figure 1. Theoretical basis used in this research

1. Persuade the shared experience

Grainer(1995) said that the reason consumers consuming is to bridge social interaction. This kind of consumption experience was not decided by self-selection but to reach the ‘co-identity’ in the social group and consumption experience through consuming process.

2. Consumption as social marker

The culture products audience chose were followed by personal culture experience, when social marker the homophiles among the consumers it must get through— purchase, acquisition and display— three stages, consumers in order to live up the expectation to the society.

3. Ritual consumption behavior

According to Marcuse, audience was controlled by desires and habits, it made them immersing in ‘happy consciousness’. (Dant, 2003) Therefore, when audience facing no matter products or media messages, they don’t conscious the circulation is

non-stop for audience having ritual consumption behavior.

4. Social levels division

Because of the limited food provision, to get into food culture under culture industry must have its threshold, involving personal financial ability and social status, therefore, food culture will present in two ways: necessity and luxury goods. Wills(2011) found that social layers as the presupposition to distinguish the culture practice, financial ability, work style, family norms and their way to get along would be take account to discuss consumption behavior. Also, the distinguishable accumulation of social capital and culture capital will reflect from the food culture consumption.

III. Methodology

This research focus on the individual in dual role: audience and consumer. From individuals media messages acceptance and consumption practice imagine and interpretation, this research is to investigate whether consumers will have reflexivity toward the food culture under culture industry. Here are the three research questions raised:

1. The purpose of consumers getting into food culture industry and the differences within their social status is to discuss the relation between food culture industry, social status and social relation.

2. Does the connection between the media messages acceptance and the food consumption exist? Whether audience/consumers affected by the media messages to interpret their food consumption experience is the second dimension of this research.

3. Will the food industry association change the habit of the consumers' consumption style? The third dimension of this research is to understand whether audience/consumers can interpret their own social culture context and the grouping management of food industry association. Research structure of this research is shown as figure 2:

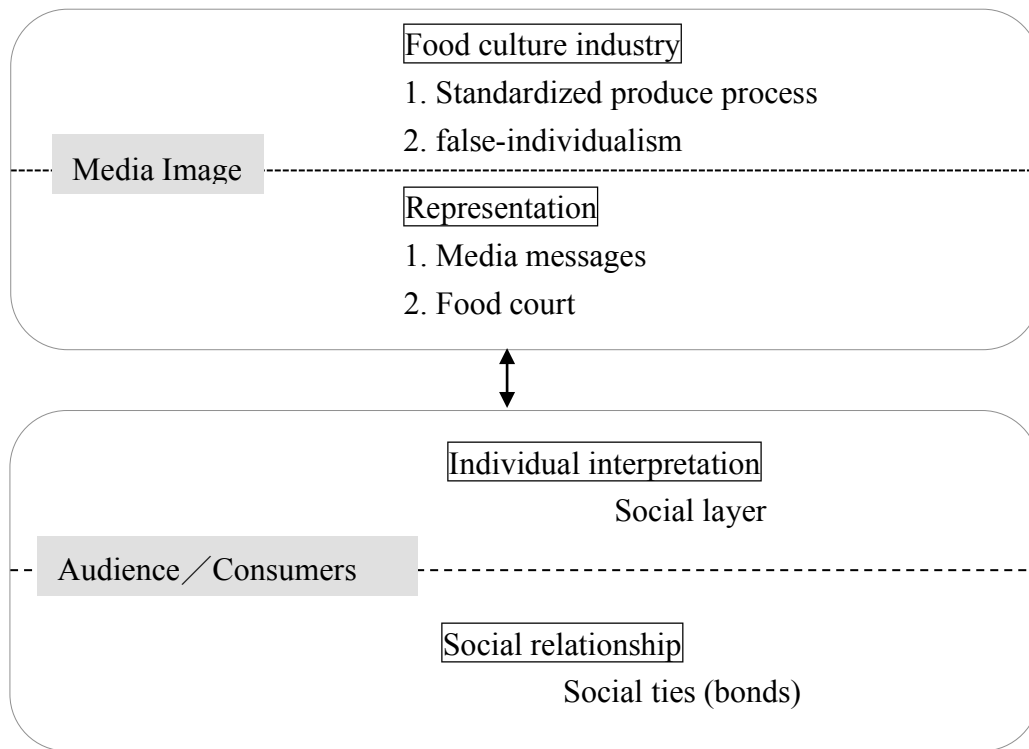


Figure 2. Research structure of this research

As Figure 2 shown, based on the food culture products were the objects of culture industry, it also represented for the results of the adopting ideology from media messages. Here, media image becoming the visible entity that was shown for consumers in the food culture field. By knowing the interpretation from the consumers, does food industry culture successfully form the individuals' social identity and self-image is also the discussing point of this research.

This research was conducted through two stages. First stage used depth interview to collect research data. Second stage use the discourse analysis to study the interviewees' interpretation, also used the publication named 《WOW ! Brands accomplished Wang Ping》 (《WOW ! 多品牌成就王品》 in Chinese) by Wang Ping as auxiliary data analysis. In first stage using general interview guide approach (Chi, 2005), this research interviewed 5 females and one male, each interviewee approached from 15 minutes to 30 minutes. Most of interviewees were acquaintance by the researcher as convenience sampling research method. Due to knowing deeply about food industry associations, researcher meant to choose two of interviewees who had work for these kinds of restaurants.

IV. Results and discussion

Fatal attraction of food culture products : shared consumption experience, social

marker, food products as conspicuous consumption

A. Shared consumption experience : non-traceable word-of-mouth

Most of interviewee mentioned the motive to consume is based on 'word-of-mouth'. F4 is the oldest interviewee, she said "People around me talked about the restaurants... when they said the restaurants were quite good...I will consider going someday..." And F1 said that she knows Wang Ping because her friends talked about it a lot. F2 is willing to be the one pass the message (WOF) to others. This research found that consumers chose the food court were because of the opinion from the people around them. It means that social relation affects the participation of consumption, also stimulates the establishment of shared experience.

B. Social marker : to leave others alone, being part of social groups

Social marker and social division have similar social meaning. To use social marker is that consumer not only want to get into particular social group, they well mark others into groups. F3 said "...the restaurant is more luxury ...it is famous one so I will go for it..." When consumers have stereotype of different levels in food culture, the consumers will also expect others use 'labels' to think about them.

C. The effects of social culture context: invisible social norms, the out-of-date media uses

This research found that food culture currently is just like the facts that culture industry indicates. The social value and product value are defined by consumers' social context and the previous experiencing consumption practices. F3 and F5 both said they will purposely dress up for Wang Ping restaurants. It shows that individual get involve in the consumer society that built by media images, consumers will be commensurate to the social expectation. Researcher also asked about where consumers will use social media to tell their friends they are eating these specific restaurants as 'self-display' behaviors. M1 said "Sometimes 'check-in'(a function of Facebook to tell people where are you) has its private part... and it's a little bit out of date to do so..."Actually, interviewee showed that they are 'free flow' to the food culture industry, because of the food products can't be durable products.

D. Products Style : becoming nonsense talking and judgment of materials

F3 tried to make description toward branded restaurants of Wang Ping "Every series, every thematic restaurant just like that... the places are bright...made you think it's shining, twinkling...the decoration or the atmosphere made you felt like a fashion style... not in a normal way..." F4

said "...most of them are different style ... each of them shown the consumers with different ...different...places...made you happy to have a meal there, without pressure..." This research analyzed that consumers visited these restaurants but they couldn't correctly recognized the style the Wang Ping set. Or they don't even know how to call the style among these restaurants. At this moment, Wang Ping claims that they have differentiated products in different restaurants, it is just the differences in price and space as food 'mass customization' products.

E. Consumers' subjective judgment in food consumption : audience agency, dynamic choices

F4 "Diet is very arbitrary..." and "the restaurants must locate their style in some way...but for me...I just eat food in the area... but I don't really care about what the restaurants did to me..." It shows that during the food consumption processing the consumers weren't influenced by the Wang Ping's media messages. Still, no matter as an audience or a consumer 'meals' depending on subjective value judgment, for the attitude the restaurants shown, environment of food courts, materials using and the delicious level etc. Knowing that when food becomes part of culture products, consumers are capricious and liking innovative, food industry associations must be flexible and creative to attract consumers successfully.

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Appendix 1. Brands of Wang Ping food industry association



Appendix 2. Demographic patterns of interviewee

No.	Kids numbers	Income (TWD)	Age	Gender	Marriage status	Job experience in industry association	Education	Job
F1	0	0~19,000	18~23	F	Single	Y	College	Service Industry
F2	0	31,001~35,000	18~23	F	Single	Y	College	Manufacturing Industry
F3	0	0~19,000	18~23	F	Single	Y	Master's degree	Student
F4	2	35,000 ↑	46~65	F	Married	N	College	Housewife
F5	0	0~19,000	18~23	F	Single	N	College	Student
M1	0	0~19,000	24~35	M	Single	Y	College	Unemployed

