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Strategies of distinction: Aesthetic materiality and restrained discourse

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ABSTRACT

This paper clarifies the role of objects in generating both cultural meanings and valuable forms of status by building upon previous research on cultural consumption and mediation, while simultaneously highlighting the intrinsic materiality of such practices. Beginning with the sociological notion that clues to high-status cultural consumption exist within journalistic writing about food, this project asks how profit-seeking firms make use of related discursive strategies to establish that their cultural products are not only delicious but also distinctive. To that end, this paper examines the packaging materials and packaging discourse of two case study firms whose food products are similar, in kind and country of origin, and whose food packages all meet the shared expectations of the US gourmet food market, in order to explore how their packages differentiate themselves from their competitors and frame their contents as valuable. In order to understand these firms as both commercial storytellers and amateur cultural intermediaries, the comparative case study methodology is employed with the goal of describing the process whereby profit-seeking firms make use of gourmet food writing and food packages to create distinction within an omnivorous, and economically valuable, marketplace. This paper draws attention to food packaging as a form of gourmet food writing which has a role to play in the dynamics of distinction within the contemporary gastronomic field.

1. Introduction

This project takes food packages seriously as legible elements of consumer culture by exploring how they create and communicate both distinction and value as they sit on grocery store shelves, surrounded by competitors whose contents are similar to their own. Of course, packages cannot communicate autonomously; each is a “silent salesman” (Judd, Bert, & Theo, 1989) in the marketplace, the vessel for strategic stories which, the firm hopes, will convince a consumer to pick one specific food item rather than another. The story of each package is an important opportunity to seduce the consumer by describing flavor and ingredients, to be sure, but also by making claims to distinction and status. In their research on American gourmet magazines, which helpfully locates clues to high-status cultural consumption in food writing, Johnston and Baumann argue that discerning consumers learn from gourmet food magazines which foods contain the most social status, despite an increasingly diverse landscape of choices (2007). In other words, adroit consumers cultivate cultural distinction by learning how to select from among the many offerings within omnivorous culinary landscapes those that generate the highest status.

Working closely with Bourdieu’s (1984) ideas about status distinctions that emphasize the need to examine the ways in which cultural consumption reproduces social and economic inequality, their careful study of gourmet food writing identifies two discursive frames which together allow only certain foods to become recognizably part of legitimate culture and exclusive, high-status

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consumption practices. But the widely shared norms of the gourmet food marketplace demand that precisely these two discursive frames be consistently used across its own omnivorous landscape. Given that what might be discursive variables in gourmet food magazines are constants in the gourmet food marketplace, I ask here how gourmet food packages establish that their contents are not only delicious but also distinctive and, therefore, contain value.

This study examines the packaging stories of two firms—both committed to supporting farming communities in Indonesia by selling Indonesian food products in upscale US markets.¹ The food products of both firms have been endorsed by culinary journalists and featured on must-eat lists; both are available for purchase in stores across the US and online. Shifting analytical attention away from consumption and, instead, toward cultural production, this paper describes how these case study firms construct and revise their product packages in order to create consumer goods that strategically communicate distinction within a specific, shared cultural and economic landscape. More specifically, I focus on the strategies used by gourmet food producers to craft distinctive food packages by attending both to materiality and, simultaneously, to omnivorous culinary discourse.

Drawing from a close-to-complete collection of their product packages, including discontinued and revised materials, I uncover the divergent strategies of these two case study firms: one cultivating distinction largely through packages that are beautiful objects, the other largely through packages that tell beautiful stories. Both of these strategies differently attempt to endow objects with aesthetic qualities in order to appeal to high status consumers.

2. Cultural distinction & omnivorousness

As Zelizer has pointed out, consumption accomplishes many things: it can satisfy immediate needs, for instance, while simultaneously allowing for participation in economic life, social interactions, and cultural practices (Zelizer, 2005). Though certainly not the only reason for consumption, the demonstration of one's cultivated sense of taste or enviable personal style through the use of novel objects has been shown to motivate consumption: modern consumer society is possibly as much a sphere for establishing social difference and position, and for shaping interpersonal relations, as it is a practice of sustenance. As a result, contemporary consumption practices have been shown to be based on the materialization of distinction, with status differences meaningfully embedded within the objects themselves (Goffman 1951; Woodward, 2007).

In recent decades, perhaps the most influential contributions to sociological understandings of the complex relationship between consumption and social stratification have come from Pierre Bourdieu, most thoroughly described in *Distinction* (1984). Bourdieu's study of tastes and cultural consumption in 1960s France, not only within high-status domains such as fine art but also those of everyday consumption, such as food, illustrates how cultural tastes correspond to the unequal distribution of wealth and resources. This distribution of tastes cannot be explained as fortuitous accident nor as the natural province of aesthetes, he argues, but rather as a consequence of the systemic organization of power.

Bourdieu's work anchors a systematic and vibrant contemporary sociological debate that centers on the concept of cultural omnivorousness. Since this concept was coined by Peterson (1992) to explain the decline in the United States of the association between high socioeconomic status and engagement with high culture, the search for cultural omnivores has prompted empirical studies in various contexts (e.g., Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007; Katz-Gerro, 2002; Peterson & Kern, 1996). As Fishman and Lizardo observe, the spread of cultural omnivorousness, so defined, is “the most well-documented empirical generalization in the sociology of cultural taste” (Fishman & Lizardo, 2013, 214).

In particular, one of the most striking tendencies to emerge from recent research on omnivorousness (e.g., Bryson, 1996; Grazian, 2005; Halle, 1996) is that members of high-status elite groups often consume cultural goods or affiliate with cultural practices associated with low-status groups. Within the culinary realm, elite culinary consumers may also appear to be omnivorously selecting both high-status and low-status foods, but Johnston and Baumann find that gourmet magazines covertly serve as primers on status, teaching elite cultural consumers how to make the most status-enhancing choices from among their many options. These magazines, they point out, possess sufficient cultural authority to bestow symbolic capital on certain goods. Such magazines appeal to upper-middle-class and upper-class audiences, the same groups found in prior research to practice omnivorous cultural consumption (Emmison, 2003; Fisher & Preece, 2003; Zavisca, 2005). By distinguishing culinary trends and spotting noteworthy foods, gourmet food magazines define a repertoire of high-status goods. As a result, gourmet food writing legitimates desirable foods—while inevitably excluding others—and consequently makes visible the discursive process of status-seeking omnivorousness. My project builds on and expands Johnston and Baumann's argument that gourmet food writing contains valuable information that allows distinction to become legible within an omnivorous landscape. This project, however, does so through the analysis of another form of gourmet food writing—one that is inscribed directly upon (rather than in magazines about) foods being sold in culturally omnivorous markets.

It is critical to recognize that because gourmet food magazines function as cultural gatekeepers within the wider organizational sphere of elite culinary consumption, theirs is a disinterested authority. (In fact, a gourmet food magazine's authority would be undermined by the discovery that it had promoted a restaurant or food product whose endorsement directly benefits itself.) Cultural intermediaries are widely expected to exhibit professional authority alongside disinterestedness; their lack of an economic motive forms a critical component of their aesthetic disposition, upon which their ability to transform ordinary materials into valued objects

¹ Gourmet is an industry classification for high-quality, premium foods in the United States. However, the high-end segment of the food market is known as the specialty food industry. Among consumers and retailers, sometimes the words gourmet and specialty are used interchangeably. For the purposes of this discussion, though, gourmet describes types of foods and consumers, and specialty connotes that segment of the wider food industry.

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