The Bittersweet Taste of Home: a Baudrillardian Interpretation of Nostalgic Food Consumption in Acculturation

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While eating food associated with home is seen as a positive coping mechanism for acculturating consumers, this paper underlines its dislocating effects. A Baudrillardian interpretation of immigrant consumer narratives shows how divergent interpretations of ‘home’ food produce both comfort and disappointment. Ultimately, consuming nostalgic food can be an ambivalent experience.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Within consumer acculturation theory, the practice of eating food associated with home is currently seen as a positive mechanism for coping with intercultural mobility. Acculturating consumers have been shown to use nostalgic food consumption practices to symbolize and materialize the home left behind (Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard 2005; Emonstpool and Kjeldgaard 2012; Lindridge, Hogg, and Shah 2004; Üstüner and Holt 2007) and to provide embodied comfort (Bardhi, Osteberg, and Bengtsson 2010; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). However, even though the double-edged character of nostalgia has been acknowledged in broader conceptualizations (Holak 2014; Loveland, Sneesters, and Mandel 2010), consumer acculturation theorists have paid less attention to negative experiences of nostalgic food consumption.

To address this current imbalance, this paper draws on Baudrillard’s (1994) theory of the simulacrum, which is rooted in poststructural semiotics. Baudrillard (1994) traces four orders of simulation which represent an increasingly complex and confounded relationship between the simulacrum and the original, or between signs and the reality they purport to represent. Within this framework, it can be seen that current interpretations of nostalgic food consumption in consumer acculturation theory have implicitly rested within Baudrillard’s (1994) first order of simulation, where the simulacrum (‘home’ food) is assumed to be a faithful reflection of the original (the idea of home). However, the deterrioralization of identities and cultural symbols in postmodern consumer cultures (Appadurai 1997; Oswald 1999; Üstüner and Holt 2007) may drive radical departures from this current assumption and, in turn, fundamentally affect how acculturating consumers experience the consumption of food associated with ‘home’. Thus, how do consumers acculturating in such contexts understand and experience the relationship between the simulacrum (‘home’ food) and its implied original (the idea of home)?

This question is empirically explored through a hermeneutic analysis (Thompson 1997) of depth interviews with 26 Southeast Asian immigrant consumers in New Zealand. To enrich and deepen the consumer narratives, visual and reflexive methods were deployed. First, each participant was asked to select objects and photographs which represent their experiences of migration (Zaltman and Coulter 1995) and use drawings to represent their social networks and social identities (Bagnoli 2009). Second, each participant was interviewed twice in line with open narrative reflexivity (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Thompson, Stern, and Arnould 1998). In their second interview, participants were presented with the researchers’ emerging interpretations and provided an opportunity to correct, qualify, or further deepen their initial responses. While participants shared rich descriptions of a wide range of food consumption practices and meanings, the consumption of food associated with the home country was frequently lensed through nostalgic language and constitutes the focus of this paper.

Participants conveyed a range of nostalgic food consumption practices in New Zealand which involved an interwoven set of dishes, nostalgic food sources, and social occasions. As summarized in Figure 1 and Table 1, these experiences were shaped by divergent interpretations and associated with conflicted feelings. On one hand, in line with Baudrillard’s (1994) first order of simulation and reflecting current assumptions in consumer acculturation theory, nostalgic food consumption practices were interpreted as symbolic representations of the home left behind and associated with feelings of comfort. Reinforcing Stamboli-Rodriguez and Visconti (2012), nostalgic food consumption enabled participants to cope with the emotional difficulties of being away from their country of origin.

On the other hand, it was also found that, in line with Baudrillard’s (1994) second order of simulation, nostalgic food consumption practices were also interpreted as incomplete copies of the original experience in the home left behind, and therefore associated with feelings of disappointment. Even though many participants attempted to reconstitute the cuisine of home by buying imported ingredients, cooking the dishes themselves, or sampling ethnic restaurants and caterers in New Zealand, these ‘copies’ of home were often experienced as imperfect and disappointing substitutes. This is because missing tastes, missing people, and missing atmospheres contributed to differences between the experience of nostalgic food consumption in New Zealand and the memory of eating food ‘at home’ in Southeast Asia.

Because of these divergent interpretations and conflicting feelings, the practice of eating food associated with home was ultimately an ambivalent experience. Simultaneous feelings of comfort and disappointment were recurrently illustrated in conflicting consumer narratives (see illustrative cases in Table 1) and aptly summarized in Tommy’s comment about eating Indonesian food in New Zealand: “It does cure your homesickness. But still it’s not 100%.” For acculturating consumers, nostalgic food consumption practices were found to be bittersweet: on one hand, symbolizing the comfort of home and on the other hand, underlining one’s dislocation from home.

This study helps to advance consumer acculturation theory by introducing additional dimensions to current theories of nostalgic food consumption. An inquiry from a Baudrillardian (1994) perspective revealed that additional dimensions of incompleteness, disappointment, and ambivalence shape immigrant consumers’ experiences of consuming nostalgic food. Even though nostalgic food consumption has been seen as a positive coping mechanism in acculturation, this study underlines the double-edged effects of nostalgic food consumption on the well-being (Block et al. 2011) of acculturating consumers.

Moreover, with the acceleration of various forms of intercultural mobility and the deterrioralization of identities and cultural symbols in postmodern consumer cultures (Appadurai 1997; Oswald 1999; Üstüner and Holt 2007), a Baudrillardian perspective provides a more nuanced framework which elaborates a middle ground between the default polarities of traditionalism (in which cultural signs connote a cultural origin) versus hyperreality (in which cultural signs carry no relationship to cultural origins). An intriguing result of this lens is that, despite postmodern claims that “individuals of our day are more and more consuming cultures rather than belonging to any one culture” (Firat 1995, 105), it was shown in this study that the idea of cultural origin continues to shape how consumers experience food as a cultural sign in both expected and unexpected ways.
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