

Food Culture as a Fashion Icon in Social Media

Dini Eldho

Lecturer, Department of English, SCMS College of Polytechnics,

Perumbavoor. Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8893-2299>

Abstract

Food has played more than the role of a basic necessity for growth, survival and movement. Food is engraved with cultural, political, social and economical connotations and has become a platform for social interactions. The identification of a person, his personality, his religion, region and much more can be derived from what he consumes. Today with the advent of many social media platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook food in its function has undergone tremendous transformation. In “Food-ography: Food and New Media” Patrizia Calefato, Loredana La Fortuna and Rafaella Sceizi focus on the recent developments in food photography and how it becomes a medium for self-expression. Gourmet photography, photos in social media with hash tags and vivid backgrounds have led to the deconstruction of food imagery. These platforms enable people to share the images of the food they order thereby announcing to the world that they are able to own and relish what is placed on the table. These images along with the hash tags and filters propel others to explore similar or the same experiences and thereby recreate what is shown to them. People are drawn into an

online platform where they are forced to prove their social, economic and cultural standing in society.

Food thus proves to be the key to deeper and multiple interpretations of meanings portrayed in the social media. This use of food as semiotics is discussed and defined by Roland Barthes, Eivind Jacobsen, Fabio Parasecoli and many more, who in their works analyse how food propagates ideologies of power and gender, thereby transforming food into what Barthes calls as “SIGN”. The paper entitled “ Food Culture as a Fashion Icon in Social Media: A Study of Foodporn” attempts to analyse how food has become a platform for social, cultural and political tension and negotiation. This study provides an insight into how food transforms itself into a system of communication, body of symbols and images and marker of opposition.

Keywords : Food, Dialectics, Culture studies.

ARTICLE

Social media – also known as Social Networking Sites (SNS) – have brought about notable changes in how identity is constructed as they ‘enable individuals to construct a member profile, connect to known and potential friends, and view other members’ connections’ (Papacharissi 2011: 304). One of the most relevant notions of social media to this study is the participation it brings about, the sense of togetherness and an active role for audiences. Jenkins et al. describe this as a participatory culture. A participatory culture is one in which ‘members believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created)’ (2009: 6).

At the heart of online identity construction lies self-presentation, the process through which individuals communicate an image of themselves to others (Baumeister 1982). Self-presentation is regarded as a minimum requirement for participation on SNS by users and one of the most important pieces of SNS (Tufekci 2008). It ‘includes the different ways in which users present themselves to other online users’ (Subrahmanyam and Smahel 2011: 63).

The beginnings of self-presentation – also known as impression management – can be traced back to Goffman (1959), who lays down in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* the foundations of self-presentation. He built his premise on a dramaturgical approach whereby he focused on how individuals present themselves

and how this happens in relation to others, and he highlights the ways in which individuals guide and control the impression of others about them through performing. Goffman dedicates a large part of his approach to the necessity of 'an audience' also known as 'others'; a key party that has to be available as there is a need to make an impression on others or control that impression. Goffman's thoughts were developed pre the digital era and have parallels in the online world: individuals put out information online deliberately to project a specific image and create a specific impression; individuals seek to gather information about each other through their profiles and the type of content they share; the front is the platform used and the personal front is replaced by the elements of the platform such as language used, emojis and photos posted and shared. All platforms present an audience, sometimes in the form of friends who are supposedly people you know or fans who are people that you do not know but represent an audience to your online activity. This study will draw on Goffman's approach as it may offer insights on the way influencers and their fans present themselves online and help to explain the relationship between the influencers and the online identity of youth.

In addition to Goffman's dramaturgical approach, the study will draw on a number of other theoretical concepts which can help explain further the relationship between influencers and their fans' online identity such as displays of authenticity, identification and parasocial relationships. Typically, influencers aim to display 'authenticity (what is genuine, real, and/or true)' (Beverland and Farrelly 2010: 838) and fans search for this authenticity in influencers. Linked to this notion is the concept of

identification. 'Identification can be said to occur when an individual adopts behaviour derived from another person or a group because this behaviour is associated with a satisfying self-defining relationship to this person or group' (Kelman 1961: 63). A study found that a spokesperson with whom the audience identifies ensures the greatest likelihood of achieving lasting attitude or behaviour change (Basil 1996). People learn by observing others and adopting their behaviours, values, beliefs and attitudes (Bandura 1986). The last concept that can help explain the relationship between influencers and fans is the Parasocial Interactive Theory (PSI) which defines the relationship between a spectator and a performer (Horton and Wohl 1956). Parasocial relationships are imagined relationships that tend to be experienced as real (Rubin and McHugh 1987).

The primary purpose of food is to provide the fundamental elements required in order to keep our bodies functioning. Food provides the nourishment that enables one to exist, advance, move and develop both mentally and physically. Today food is no longer limited to its basic function. Studies, research and scholarship on food have bolstered exceptionally over the last decade. Food and food studies are no longer isolated for it has embraced other disciplines to make interdisciplinary feasible. One of the reasons why food studies are gaining popularity among people is that they want to know from where their food is coming, the farming system, its market, the history and the future of food. Universities over the years have started providing courses on food studies concentrating on the political economy of food including the policy aspects and the scope of sustainable food. Connecting the cultural, social and historical aspects of

food-ways and food studies with literature we find texts that offers an insight into the rapidly developing field of food system. Food continues to fascinate and this is the motivating force behind numerous studies conducted and books written in this field. While Margaret Mead questions man's attitude towards overeating and its impact on humanity in "Why Do We Overeat?", Pierre Bourdieu addresses in "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgemental of Taste" the taste of luxury and that of necessity based on class differentiation. "Lost in Translation: Food, Identity and Otherness" by Simona Stanos explores the relation between culture and food. Tulasi Srinivas, Anne Allison, Rebecca Swenson explore the meaning of motherhood, masculinity and femininity in relation to cooking. They elaborate on how food and cooking propagate ideologies of power. The relation between food and gender is further explored by Fabio Parasecoli in "Feeding Hard Bodies", T.J.M. Holden and many more at various levels. These examples give an insight into the various works that have been published over the years in this field. Detailed studies in this field reflects the relation food shares with other disciplines like gender studies, agriculture, class differentiation and so forth. Works by Fabio Parasecoli, Roland Barthes, Eivind Jacobsen expounds the ability of food to communicate meanings. They explore the symbolic and semiotic power of food. Parasecoli in *Bite Me* gives riveting insight into the role of food in popular culture. It reveals the relation between food and human body and how it becomes a platform for political and ideological discussions. Roland Barthes in "Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption" claims that food is a "system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour" (24). Every nation or

region has its own peculiar food habits, methods of preparation and serving patterns which is quite different from other nations. Therefore, every food item has its own historical, cultural and social significance. The food that one eats indirectly points to his roots, his culture and identity. Food therefore is not just for consumption alone. Every culture or society selects, within what is available, what is to become a part of their food culture. Globalization, privatization and liberalization have enabled countries like India to grow and progress at a faster pace. Export and import led growth pave way for economic development. These industrial policies have helped many to experience a better and comfortable life. Globalization according to Joseph Stiglitz provides job opportunities for many people in the third world countries like India (8-15). Globalization also enables an exchange of the cultural values and the food habits. With globalization and privatization, we witness a quick and inevitable change in the eating habits of the people. Companies like KFC, Pizza Hut, Domino's established firm roots in India. The transition in the nutritional level has led to obesity and many diet related problems especially in countries like India which has an entirely distinct food culture. "The main drivers to changes in food systems and dietary patterns, such as urbanization, increased income, capital flow and market liberalization" (Kennedy et al. 1) left resulting impact on the nutritional level. The way food is prepared and understood have changed because food itself has become a marker of change. Food is no longer determined by hunger rather on the basis of taste. To be modern and to be a part of the fast-changing world means to be a part of the changing food habits. Food according to Barthes contains a twofold function, being nutritious and its value as a protocol

("Psychosociology" 29). The primary function of food dissolves the very moment the basic needs are fulfilled. On the degree of institutions, there are also work based lunch which is commercialized in the pattern of special menus. The significance here is not on fulfilling hunger rather priority is placed on comfort and long discussions. The abundance of food, the colourful alluring advertisements and the food applications available in the mobile phones open up the possibility of constant eating at anytime and anywhere. We live in a world surrounded by a wide variety of food. The food apps like Zomato, Swiggy provide an easily attainable platform for users to relish their favourite dish comfortably and effortlessly at home or anywhere at their convenience. With the plethora of food around, what we witness today is a shift from malnutrition to malnutrition. There was a time, and still in many parts of the world, when lack of enough nutrients was a major concern but today malnutrition is mainly because of the excess of food intake by people. With the advent of the mall culture the global market has found a wider platform to plunge in. Malls crowded with brands from all over the world compel people to respond to the new arrivals. These shops respond not only to the new needs and demands of their customers rather they dramatize this whole need and uphold those who frequent it to be modern and in with the time. Today with the advent of many social media platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook food in its function has undergone tremendous transformation. In "Food-ography: Food and New Media" Patrizia Calefato, Loredana LaFortuna and Rafaella Sceizi focus on the recent developments in food photography and how it becomes a medium for self-expression. Gourmet photography, photos in social media with hash tags and vivid backgrounds

have led to the deconstruction of food imagery. These platforms enable people to share the images of the food they order thereby announcing to the world that they are able to own and relish what is placed on the table. These images along with the hash tags and filters propel others to explore similar or the same experiences and thereby recreate what is shown to them. People are drawn into an online platform where they are forced to prove their social, economic and cultural standing in society. People are forced to visit cafes and restaurants and click pictures of the delicacies they order and post these pictures on social media for a sense of belonging and inclusion. Often people end up in dissatisfaction in not being able to recreate what is shown on these visual platforms. The picture of the food taken in particular angles highlights the atmosphere in which the food is eaten and by whom. "On Instagram, this process of making meaning creates the sense of being an insider, which allows for inclusion in a familiar experience. Instagrammers seek to both have and prove "authentic" experiences" (Herman). The last few years have seen a dramatic increase in food vlogs, photography, online cookery shows and much more. They push the edible world in to a visual space where the audience are forced to visit and experience that what is shown. The Georgetown Cupcake in Washington run by two sisters Sophie Kallinis LaMontagne and Katherine Kallinis Berman say that the reviews from their customers have led them to ship cupcakes to their fans worldwide. They place their shops in areas that are iconic in order to attract more customers and to provide a fun experience for the buyers (Coleman). It is not the cupcakes alone that are placed in the limelight rather the entire shop is under scrutiny. Having a cupcake from any shop is not the prime focus rather to

have a cupcake from one of the top brands is of primary importance. Naturally the question that arises is whether it is the hunger that compels you to travel miles to have just a cupcake. To have a Georgetown Cupcake now has gone down straight into the bucket list of many. These shops with welcoming interiors, music, menus and photographs on social media compel people to painstakingly travel all the way to the shop to just to have a few cupcakes. As LaMontagne says “When someone brings one to you, or you open up a box, it feels a little more special than, say having an ice cream cone.” (ibid). The products are promoted in such a way that it provides happiness not only to the one who buys it but also to the one to whom it is gifted. Just like sending or offering roses to the loved ones, sending across a box of beautifully placed cupcakes have become an act of expressing care and love to the close ones. This is what Roland Barthes calls a second order myth: that a language which has a purpose that people consider as only a pragmatic, is used by some interest or agendas to fulfil a different end (qtd. in Allison 157-58). Food, restaurants and cafes have become platforms to bring people together, build new relations, resolve conflicts or even a cordial space to bid forever goodbyes. Today every occasion is graced with the presence of food, food that is specific to the occasion. The food placed on the table before a group of people gathered for a business meeting is strikingly different from a table set for a family get together or for situations like sports, leisure or celebrations of any sort. Food is no longer consumed or ordered to quench one’s hunger rather to create a space for easy conversations. Meetings be it formal or informal are now largely restricted to hotels and coffee shops. Even the very concept of having a coffee has undergone so much change

that coffees no longer are consumed to energize oneself. Coffee was once “considered a stimulant to the nervous system (as Michelet claimed that it led to revolution) but contemporary advertising expressly denies this traditional function and associates it more with breaks and relaxation” (Barthes, “Psychosociology” 29). Food on another pedestal continues to inspire many designers to look upon food as a major source of inspiration for clothing ranging from everyday wear to dramatic costumes to be worn at the red-carpet events. Cooking has now become a lot like fashion where immense energy, brainstorming and creativity is put into prepare and aesthetically place what is being prepared. Chocolate boxes, food wrappers are all designed with at most care giving importance to even the most intricate of designs. Chocolates these days come wrapped in at least two covers. An outer glossy cover with tempting pictures and captions and a less glamorous inner cover to show that it is packed safely and is hygienic. The costlier the chocolate the more wrappers and boxes. There is a level of taste and luxury attached to pursuing certain food from certain places. As Barthes says the food one eats and how one eats often determines one’s social status (23). Food like fashion has its grades but restaurants with lowers prices make it easier to try out dishes that are reserved to certain exclusive hotels. Hence one may say that designing clothes is similar to cooking for both need the correct ingredients in the right quantity and quality. Therefore food has become a fashion icon now. Food thus proves to be the key to deeper and multiple interpretations of meanings portrayed in the social media. It is now an established body of communication.

References

Allison, Anne. *Food and Culture: A Reader*, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, Routledge, 2013, Google Books, pp. 154-172. [www. books. google. com/books/about/Food_and_Culture.html?id=uO210jcx0ZUC](http://www.books.google.com/books/about/Food_and_Culture.html?id=uO210jcx0ZUC). Accessed 18Jan. 2020.

Ashley, Bob, et al. *Food and Cultural Studies*. Routledge, 2004. Google Books, [www. books. google. com/books/about/Food_and_Cultural_Studies.html?id=2vYp3_IngH8C](http://www.books.google.com/books/about/Food_and_Cultural_Studies.html?id=2vYp3_IngH8C). Accessed 15 March. 2022.

Barthes, Roland. "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption." *Food and Culture: A Reader*, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, Routledge, 2013, Google Books, pp. 23-30. [www. books. google. com/books/about/Food_and_Culture.html?id=uO210jcx0ZUC](http://www.books.google.com/books/about/Food_and_Culture.html?id=uO210jcx0ZUC). Accessed 10 March. 2022.

---. "Mythologies." *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, edited by John Storey, Pearson, 2003, Word Press, pp. 118-125. [www.uniteyouthdublin.files. wordpress.com](http://www.uniteyouthdublin.files.wordpress.com)

Mead, Margaret. "Why Do We Overeat?" *Food and Culture: A Reader*, edited by CaroleCounihan and Penny Van Esterik, Routledge, 2013, Google Books, pp. 19-22. www.books.google.com/books/about/Food_and_Culture.html?id=uO210jcx0ZUC. Accessed 15 Jan 2022.