

Chapter 8

A Cultural Taboo: How Social Media Is Transforming the French 'Slow Food' Hegemony

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ABSTRACT

The recent arrival of American gourmet-style food-trucks to the streets of France is transforming consumer behaviour. In France, a nation whose culture has traditionally experienced food as a blend of 'art, pleasure and leisure,' the perception of Anglo-Saxon food-trucks as 'junk food' is now being challenged. A new generation of re-conceptualized food-trucks are catering to French consumers - who still demand high-quality food but who are willing to try a new format. Communication via social networking sites (SNS) has acted as a catalyst for changing food consumption. Information about food-trucks is shared digitally across communities of interest, drawing attention to the marketing power of contemporary consumers. These 'micro-communities of food' have created social groups that now congregate in the streets of France rather than in traditional, sit-down restaurants. This study explores the food-truck trend that is emerging in France with the intention of putting forward a new framework that identifies the factors which influence the purchase of food-truck products in France.

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INTRODUCTION

Shifting Patterns of Culture and Food Identities

Food and culture form an indivisible equilibrium (Cruz & Buchanan-Oliver, 2014), evolving gradually in response to changes in the wider environment. As this inquiry will demonstrate, certain factors are now transforming this equilibrium, challenging the strong cultural barriers that are present in France (de Lanauze, 2015).

Drawing on the works of Bourdieu (1979, 1994) into social reproduction, and of Solomon (1983) into symbolic interactionism, it is thought that ‘habitus’ (the social milieu in which a child is raised) can influence a person’s behaviour and can help to reproduce social classes. Food is a distinctive signal or symbol of different positions in the social order. Symbolic interactionism explores how symbols are defined and used within social interactions, and explains how the social world changes through these interactions (Solomon, 1983). The social and symbolic value of food is heavily influenced by the venue where the food is purchased and consumed (Costa, Zepeda, & Sirieix, 2014). Food can act as a mediator between cultures, materially and symbolically (Fischler, 1990); it is reiterative, ephemeral and emotional (Béji-Bécheur, Ourahmoune, & Özçağlar-Toulouse, 2014). The sociology literature provides a partial insight into the role played by food in society but it cannot offer an explanation of emerging or contemporary trends in food preferences. This enquiry puts forward a snapshot of the cultural changes taking place in food consumption in France as a result of advances in information and communication technologies (ICT). Communication via social networking sites (SNS) allows consumers to share information about food-trucks and create communities of interest. Online communities of consumers have influenced food trends and contributed to changing food identities, particularly in reference to food-trucks.

Although culture ‘shifts’ imperceptibly over time, the dominant themes in literature stem from the theoretical frameworks of culture offered by Hofstede (2001), Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (1997) and Hall & Hall (1995). These studies were based on an assessment of the cultural norms of a nation at a specific point in time; the perspective is fixed and does not take into account change. This ‘essentialist approach’ no longer fits with the complexities of modern-day multicultural societies and the increasingly digital environment. The essentialist approach has three main weaknesses: it assumes that a behaviour observed in one nation may be used under similar conditions to predict the behaviour of another. It also assumes that individuals identify themselves primarily in terms of their membership in a cultural grouping labelled externally as a particular nation state. Lastly, this approach argues that while

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