



Food Aestheticism: How Images of Food Communicate Economic and Social Value

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Abstract

This study was a qualitative study. It combined semiotic theory to analyze the data. This article focuses on how images of food in Instagram represent economic and social values. In addition, this study reveals how photography has message and connotative meaning. This study shows that the use of aesthetic components in food photography aims to promote food product embraced by foodies in Instagram. The image of food can be a communicative language which shows economic value where all the photo embed marketing strategies. The color of food, the property used when photograph the food, somehow, attract followers to consume the food (appetizing the viewers.). Moreover, the kind of food they choose and where to dine out can communicate the social status where they belong.

Keywords: *Foodies; Food Photography; Semiotic; Food Aesthetic; Food and Culture*

Introduction

Social media is a virtual space to invite people to express themselves. Instagram provides a new way of to express the self virtually through visuals - aesthetics in the form of photography combined with sophisticated technology (Manovich, 2017, 1). The hobby of photography has also begun to include the food as an object or known as food photography (LeBesco et al., 2018, 1; Middha, 2018, 5; Simeone & Scarpato, 2020, 3).

Food photography on Instagram has influenced people's eating habits (Nisak & Hariyanto, 2017, 3). This is because social media is a fertile ground for creating visual exposure, particularly photography. Instagram makes it easy and allows users to take photos, apply digital filters, and share them with the public. All kinds of food-related hedonism are freely displayed. Borrowing the term food enthusiast, the phenomenon of uploading food is an activity of visualizing food through the media of photography.

Food photography is closely related to food presentation or food styling which is a way to organize and present food. This element is an important element in the world of food photography. The art of food photography has existed in Indonesia since the development of culinary in the early 2000s.

The profession of food bloggers, food photographers also grew in that year (Lazuardi & Triady, 2015, 15).

Food photographers often refer to themselves as foodies. Foodies is a term for those who are “deeply engaged with food, keen to share their knowledge” (Lofgren, 2013, 4). Foodies is often used in the world of endorsement in the social media, especially Instagram. This is because foodies have a significant role in influencing consumers to buy a food product (Mbouw & Qonita, 2019: 8) Foodies with high followers and engagement rates will be used by business owners to promote their products.

Aesthetic preferences play a very significant role in marketing success, so an attractive visual image will always be present in it. Visual images with good aesthetic preferences can basically create visual pleasure for the viewer (Ida, 2014: 127–131). The enjoyment of food in images is the enjoyment obtained from the act of sharing food experiences online and for the wider community, which positively contributes to overall consumer pleasure and satisfaction (Mendini et al., 2019, 6) In addition, food advertisements supported by Instagram celebrities with a high level of visual complexity generate more fun and passion than those supported by food experts (Kusumasondjaja & Tjiptono, 2019, 2).

Research on food and foodies generally examine self-image or self-existence which is further strengthened by the development of technology in the era of social media. The activity of uploading photos of daily activities is a symbolic motive for self-existence to show one's social position and self-image in society (Haryono, 2020; Kurniawati, 2020, 3; Sorensen, 2013, 4). Meanwhile, research conducted by several other experts with a habitus and taste perspective from Pierre Bourdieu stated that the food chosen can show social status to differentiate people according to their capital value (Rahimi & Bose, 2018, 1; Warde et al., 2019, 4).

Other research on food has explained that consumers come to visit places to eat for hangouts, among others, the factors of ambiance (atmosphere), discounts or festivals, the popularity of the chef and also the appearance of food (Khan & Aditi, 2020, 1; Raina et al., 2020, 2) From this description, it can be concluded that the appearance of food is very important in eating activities. This shows that the use value of food has changed into other sign values such as social status, self-existence, etc.

Not only to show social status, photos of food become indirect communication regarding changes in cultural forms where communication has been mediated by images. When communication or messages that appear in images become important in this era of social media, there will always be a meaning 'what looks good and what is good to see (Debord, 1994: 60). Barthes stated that the signs of a commodity are meta-goods. This means that vulnerability is interpreted as containing individual freedom and aesthetic values in it (Meinhold: 32). In a commodity the existing values will always be related to economic values. For example, an attractive clothing photo does not always have to do with aesthetic beauty or existence, but an advertising strategy that requires economic values.

In semiotics, Barthes also talks about photos in his work entitled "The Photographic Message" in 1961 and "Rethoric of the Image" also in 1961. Both of his works depict photos that have connotative meaning. This is because photos are a means that can convey messages directly and can convince someone of the truth of the photo. However, behind the photography contains a symbolic message (coded-iconic message). Messages can be created by relating them to pre-existing "knowledge".

This research reveals the meaning behind aesthetic photos of food by using a semiotic analysis. Semiotics studies sign that all human actions, in their cultural form, carry meaning. Signs are not always on objects because anything can be a sign such as events, habits, cultural products, etc. (Tinarbuko, 2009: 12). This sign is a signal or purpose. This research will show the meaning behind food aestheticism owned by foodies in the community and why aestheticism is necessary in each photo upload. All will be further clarified in this article.

Research Methodology

This research was a descriptive qualitative research which used semiotic as a way to analyze. Patton has stated that qualitative data includes “descriptions of observed situations, events, people, interactions and behaviors; direct quotes from people about their experiences, attitudes, beliefs and thoughts; and excerpts or entire portions of documents, correspondence, notes, and case histories” (Newman & Benz, 1998, 16). Furthermore, Denscombe (2003) has also stated that qualitative research can understand the meaning and patterns of behavior. Thus, by using qualitative research, this study explored the meaning of foodies behavior in food photography activities and interprets the data to get a comprehensive picture (Denscombe, 2003, 11)

This study used data obtained through coding the image of food uploaded by foodies in Instagram account @JangkrikKuliner which was randomly selected for 5 months from August 2020 to December 2020. From the coding results found 50 photos showing aesthetic photos of food. Furthermore, the data was sorted and reduced according to the needs of this study. There were 10 photos used as research samples.

Result and Discussion

A. Food Photography: The Art of Attracting and Influencing Followers

The hobby of food photography is closely related to food presentation or food styling, which is a way to organize and present food. This element is an important element in the world of food photography. Those aesthetic food more or less attract other users so that it influences them to consume the food. How can food attract and influence others? how to serve food will be discussed in the sections below:

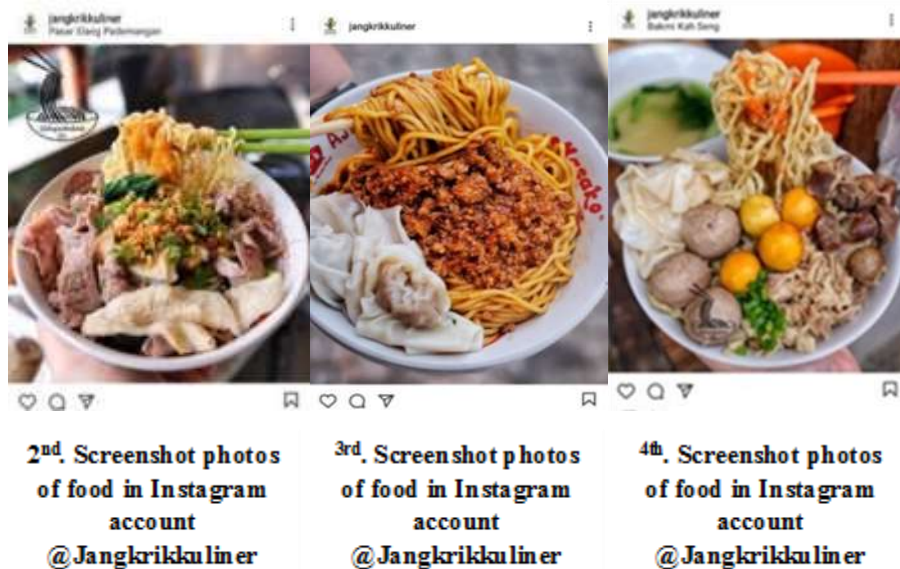


1st. screenshot of food photo in Instagram account @jangkrikkuliner

The picture above shows that the main photo object is food, which is beautifully arranged and is camera ready. Food visualization with the use of banana leaves in displaying food is a symbolic sign to make the photo looks attractive. Using food sticks also shows that the foodies is enjoying food with a

traditional nuance. In addition, the use of skewers indicates the effort to beautify food photos to make them look delicious. This illustrates that traditional food can have a high selling value with the right and good aesthetic touch. Or in other words, traditional food uploaded with high aesthetic preferences will have high prestige so that it will attract the audience (Arsita, 2018, 6)

Attractive photos of food encourage people to throw away thoughts on the real taste of the food. It means that the main focus in presenting food by carrying feasibility values that are considered good separates food from the taste and nutritional content. People will tend to look at the object that is uploaded if the object is attractive from an aesthetic point of view rather than looking at the cholesterol content, the fat in the food and so on.



In addition, the use of toppings can support photo preferences in the world of food photography. Food style is very important in presenting food to attract buyers. This is because food style is a way of organizing food for the "beauty" of food, and a new way of how to create a more appetizing image (Custer, 2010, 13). As the picture above shows, a traditional menu added with toppings such as dumplings, eggs, chicken liver, and meatballs can attract people to consume them. Toppings also serve to display food to make it appear asymmetrical. Spatial planning and food composition are important to arouse appetites.

In the aesthetic world of photos, the position of plates and spoons and forks is also indispensable in order to create attractive food when photographed (ibid.). The use of chopsticks in a sideways position indicates that the main focus to be shown is the food so that the viewer becomes focused on the appearance of the food and is not disturbed by the position of the chopsticks. The photo of chopsticks being pulled up indicates delicacy of eating the dish.

Not only does the position of the chopsticks make for an attractive photo, but the portion of food also has a very important role in making food attractive (ibid.). Portions of food illustrate neatness in the art of beautifying photos. So that a sufficient and neat portion will attract people to see it.

Moreover, people will feel attracted to the visual aesthetics of food with a good arrangement and also have a variety of colors (Paakki et al., 2019, 4).



5th. Screenshot photos of food in Instagram account @Jangkrikkuliner



6th. Screenshot photos of food in Instagram account @Jangkrikkuliner

Seeing the picture above, the combination of color is dominated by orange and yellow. The use of garnishes such as red chilies and sauces, orange carrots, and egg on the 6th picture raises the appetizing of the viewer. Basically, the color selection technique in food promotion is very necessary because it affects the interest in consuming it (Custer, 2010, 7). Choosing red, yellow and orange colors can inspire people to be very hungry (Lisa, 2016: 21). These colors are often used in marketing strategies.

In another aspect, packaging is very necessary in the world of food photography, especially on social media (Vijitbunyanon, 2020, 5). This is because the appearance of packaging in photography can attract consumers. An example of packaging in food photography can be seen in the image below:



7th. Screenshot photos of food in Instagram account @Jangkrikkuliner

Seeing images with good aesthetic preferences in reality can build visual enjoyment for the viewer (Ida, 2014, 127). The enjoyment of food obtained from the act of sharing food experiences online and for the wider community contributes to total consumer satisfaction (Mendini et al., 2019, 19). Thus, food advertisements supported by Instagram celebrities likes foodies generate more passion compared with food experts because *foodies* used high visual level complexity to attract the followers ((Kusumasondjaja, 2019: 3). These following action can be seen through the effort of creating a good packaging of a food product. Hence, the use of foodies to sell the food is a new way of marketing.

From the above expression, it can be said that the use of aesthetics in uploading photos of food is to attract followers. From this description, it implies that *foodies* is required to produce photos that attract the attention of the Instagram audience in order to influence viewers to eat the food they upload. In this way, aesthetics of food is very necessary and is an obligation for *foodies*. This illustrates that new media affects consumption behavior so that use value of food has changed (Debord, 1994, 18).

The explanation above can give understanding that the use of techniques in food photography is needed to create other premises such as attracting consumers. Instagram users by adopting expressive aesthetics in fact generate more responses from users to the brands being promoted (Kusumasondjaja, 2019). This illustrates that Instagram seems very suitable as a mediation tool for shaping image-power in the non-profit sector, because images can carry so much meaning and can easily provide a situational awareness of needs (McNely, 2012, 1).

B. Representation of Social Status, Self Image in Food Photography



8th. Screenshot photos of food in Instagram account @Jangkrikkuliner



9th. Screenshot photos of food in Instagram account @Jangkrikkuliner



10th. Screenshot photos of food in Instagram account @Jangkrikkuliner

Aesthetic visual images have meanings of connotations that communicate social values such as social status. This can be seen from the object of the image above in the form of food served in a simmer pot containing garlic, onions, potatoes, carrots, celery, red pepper, green paper, cherry tomatoes, red dates, and wolfberry with imported meat served with spices sent directly from china (image 8th). The food is visualized using a camera focus focused on the simmer hot food as an object. This illustrates that foodies want the public to see the types of food they consumed which represents modern and high prestigious foods. The prestigious of foods can be seen through the mention of meat and spices sent directly from China in the photo caption of the food uploaded in Instgram. It means that it is a kind of imported food.

The image of the Chinese food menu that is described by the foodies community on their accounts seems to want to convey to the audience that they are in a certain social strata. Chinese food is usually enjoyed by certain groups which usually refer to the upper class regarding to the price. This illustrates that through the objects they consumed, a person can find his hierarchy or find his own community based on their social status.

The efforts to show self-construction to the public can also be seen through the information added in the caption or others additional information such as 'add location' or adding locations such as the name of the café visited and the address (@ Caffepralet.jkt, Ruko Gallery Metro Broadway, Pantai Indah Kapuk and also @pepperloin Steakhouse, Pantai Indah Kapuk). These restaurant (@Caffepralet and @pepperloin steak house) serves modern types of food that have high prestige because it serves food with foreign accents with the use of foreign terms, 'Smoked Soy Baby Black Rib, Wagyu Steak, as well as Simmer Pot. Only by creating a sign in the form of a location and also naming food in a foreign language can create a meaning of class and social status in the realm of social media. The image formed through this sign will continue to be exist and be lasting in social media life. This is because foodies will continue to exist through uploading their photos to maintain their social status in the social media space.

Conclusion

Food photos uploaded on foodies social media show the meanings contained in each of its components. Photos of food uploaded by foodies that are aesthetically pleasing with color combinations, neat space compositions, and selection of food types not only communicate the meaning of social status, but also a business strategy.

Photos of food by foodies with additional knick-knacks such as chopsticks, forks, and other decorations highlight economic value in the form of photo beauty. The use of colors such as yellow, orange is also a strategic step to attract consumers to consume these food products. From this statement, it can be said food images is a non-verbal communication to attract followers or viewers to consume food or a product that is displayed. This is because foodies have entered the business world by becoming endorsed artists by food business owners. Thus, visual preference is highly important to attract the audience.

From the description above, it can be said that photography is a visual medium that can easily convey reality. Object selection, object composition, color selection, presents real beauty realism. In addition, food photography is an art form that propagates because it can influence the eating fantasies of viewers. Obviously, food photography does not only have artistic and visual value but is also a new way in the marketing world to attract consumers and build social hierarchy.

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