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Selling Bad Food: The Grotesque Body in Food Advertising

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Abstract

In Taiwan, the commercials of the so-called "junk food" are mostly illustrated with quality such as youth, joy, and rebellion. People can see these attributes in the ads of Kinder Bueno, Lay's Potato Chips, Gudao Plum Green Tea (古道梅子綠茶)[1], to name only a few. Advertisers often promote these products with images of teenage pop culture. To make young people buy their products, advertisers often depict an unruly and uncontained body in the commercials. The body representation of this kind exemplifies a Bakhtinian grotesque body. It represents a body in flux and in motion. This paper aims to look into the grotesque body in food advertising in Taiwan. Through examining Bakhtin's idea of the grotesque body, we can see how the body in food advertising is re/presented as a medium with different meanings.

Key Words: *Advertising, Food Commercial, Bakhtin, The Grotesque Body, Junk Food.*

Introduction

Junk food is usually considered to be a kind of product that linked with meanings such as "youth, vigor, sexual attractiveness and fun times" in advertising (Lupton, 1996). Advertisers depicted these established values with the food in order to attract more buyers. In the commercials, the depiction of the body interacts with the outside world frequently, and the body movement is out-stretching and sometimes even formless, which is different from the ideal fit body and the unfit body of modern times. The body in junk food commercials is fun and relaxing. It is an embodiment of youth and creativity. A Bakhtinian carnivalesque situation is applied in the commercials to sell bad food to young people.

In order to find out the ideology of the body in food advertising of Taiwan, I would like to borrow Bakhtin's idea of *classical body* to see how this kind of body is related to people. Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and scholar, introduced the idea of the difference between modern and pre-modern ways of looking at the body in his book *Rabelais and His World* (1984). In this work, Bakhtin studied the interaction between the social and the literary, as well as the meaning of the body.

Theorizing the Body

According to Bakhtin, the pre-modern way of looking at the body is that the body is grotesque, and the modern way of looking at the body is classical. Bakhtin suggested that the invention of the classical body is related to the sixteenth century rise of individualism and bourgeois subjectivity. The new body canon is part of the social transformation at that time. In *Rabelais and His World*, he interpreted the grotesque body and the classical body as oppositional during Renaissance periods. The grotesque body is a body that is "in

[1]A product of CHEN KOU WEI FOOD ENTERPRUSE CO., LTD. In the commercial featuring Amber Kuo, she dozes off in class and her spirit is outside of her body to find the tea. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tr-8-yqxMfM

the act of becoming" (p. 317). It is always in the condition of uncertainty and is forever changing. It is "unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (p. 26). It does not separate from the world. This kind of body is a body without a social value and a fixed identity. It is a body in flux.

On the other hand, the classical body is finished and closed. Bakhtin related it to the body of church and state. It is an ideal concept of the body at that time. Peter Stallybrass believed that during Renaissance, the grotesque body privileges the area of anus while the classical body "emphasizes the head as the seat of reason" (1986, p. 124). The opposition between the classical body and the grotesque body is that one is rational and controlled, and the other is lustful and uncontrolled. The grotesque body speaks the language of "festive obscenity and abuse"; the classical body speaks the language of "palaces, churches, institutions, and private homes" (p. 124). The distinction between the classical body and the grotesque body indicates that the classical body is "civilized" and "polite" and the grotesque body is "uncivilized" and "impolite" within the sixteenth century cultural context.

According to Mary Russo (1995), the modern idea about the classical body is the ideal body which dominates the thinking of the middle class, while the grotesque body is viewed as "the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change" (p. 62). The opposition indicates that the modern idea of a civilized body is constructed through the middle-class ideology. Russo points out that "[t]he grotesque body is opposed to the Classical body which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism; the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world" (p. 63).

Bakhtin illustrated how the grotesque body celebrates the cycle of life in *Rabelais and His World*, and he assumed that the grotesque body has the power to regenerate the social system. Unlike the Bakhtinian grotesque body, the grotesque body in food advertising is not as promising as the Bakhtinian one. The grotesque body in food advertising, however, is just a momentary release from the constrained life in modern society. It does not possess the power which Bakhtin mentioned in his work.

To discuss the festive quality in the commercials of junk food, I would like to start with my case examples.

Case Example

In a 2009 *Sprite* commercial, the advertisers portray the body of young people to promote the product. The commercial depicts a park with many young people on a hot day. It seems that nobody could stand the heat. After drinking the soda, the male protagonist in a green T-shirt starts dashing at the man in a gray T-shirt. Just when they are bumping into each other, they turn into cool water which makes them feel refreshed. The female protagonist also dashes at two young men and enjoy the coolness after her body collided with them and dissolved.

Picture 1. The commercial of Sprite in 2009

Analysis

In the beginning of the commercial, the viewers could sense the tension between the male protagonist and the man in gray. Their relation is aggressive and competitive. No one has to pay respect to the other. The two men in the commercial establish a kind of mutual relation through this "playful aggression" (Graeber, 696). It is a relation that people "make fun of each other, tease, harass, even (often) make play of attacking each other" (p. 696). The two seem to possess a joking relation in this scene. Graeber believes that the joking relation is based on a mutual exchange of abuse which pinpoints an equality of social position (p. 696). The relationship between the two men is by no means a hierarchical one. They dash at each other and make play of attacking through bumping into each other. The sense of class is no longer functional in the ad.

After bumping into each other, the two turn into water and their bodies appear to be formless. This depiction resembles the Bakhtinian grotesque body. The grotesque body is a body in flux, and it is always in the act of becoming during the process. It is amusing the advertisers represent the body with water and try to connect it to the drink they promote.

The grotesque body interacts with the world, it is unfinished and outgrows itself. It is hard to identify it with selfhood. Self identification and other formation process which is concerned with the creation of a self-center have nothing to do with the grotesque body. The body either opens to the outside world or the world enters to it. In the commercial, the two men just mix into the world or the world mix into them. The splashing water they generate through the collision does not make them disappear. They could still enjoy the cool water they make. After the collision, the two men reappear in their normal body shape to enjoy the coolness. They are absorbed by the world, and the world is also absorbed by them. There are no boundaries between the men and the world. The two men are in a liminal space which they are both in and outside the world. They are in a state filled with ambiguity, indeterminacy, and openness.

What It Means to be Cool? Teenage Pop Culture and Globalization

Famous Taiwanese singers Jay Chou (周杰倫) and Angela Chang (張韶涵) starred in the commercial. Stars and celebrities are always an attraction in commercials, partly because they already got people who admire them as iconic figures in society. The commercial represents a teen version world which is full of rebellion, energy, and fun.

Coca-Cola Company advertises via the mass media all over the world. For the company, the target buyers in Taiwan are mostly young people. Advertisers use a lot of "new people" (新人類) as their main icons in the commercials (Yang and Hsu, 2005). The "new people" is an idea which describes a group of young people who enjoy performing activities concerning with teenage pop culture. The advertisements help the company become an important role in popular culture through the connection of the drink and the teen

fashion (p. 148). For example, a famous Taiwanese band, *Mayday*, is their face of the company from 2013 to 2014.

The strategy of the company's globalization process is to interact with the local culture in Taiwan. The stars and the activities in the commercials successfully make *Coca-Cola* a fashion icon. The commercials convey an idea of "cool" among teenagers. It does not mention that drinking coke may make people suffer from tooth decay nor the increasing chance of taking in too much sugar. *Coke*, and other soft drinks like *Sprite*, is by no means a healthy drink according to dietetic rules. The connection with some "cool" people helps to sell the image to the target buyers. The subtext in the ad is: "Drink *Sprite*, and you will be as cool as Jay Chou and Angela Chang." Advertisers define the meaning of "cool" in the commercial through the connection with pop stars.

In the ad, nobody pays attention to whether one gets a fit body or not. The normal dietetic rules are suspended in this context. It illustrates a world with possibilities and fun. Advertisers try to promote the unhealthy food by depicting a world in which the body could be perceived as grotesque. The close shots of body parts are rare in the commercial. There are no detailed body exposures in the ad. Advertisers represent the body as an idea, a mere image. The actors share a grotesque world in the ad. They enjoy this little mess-up. It is a carnival for young and cool people. Advertisers establish a *carnivalesque* in the commercial to rationalize the grotesque body they present.

A Teenage Carnival

Carnivalesque is a term used by Bakhtin to describe a liberating and out-of-order world. The term also relates to the idea of a mediaeval carnival. During this period, the rules and regulations are reversed and suspended. In a carnival, men could dress like women, beggars could be like kings, peasants would abuse nobles, and everyone could curse, swear, and laugh. Bakhtin theorized *carnivalesque* as a way to resist and challenge the representational authority. *Carnivalesque* involves a "temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men… and of the prohibitions of usual life" (1984, p. 15). It is a sign of disobedience.

Though this concept is discussed in mediaeval and renaissance contexts, it can still be relevant to examine within the contemporary pop culture. Teenagers are thought to be unconventional, rebellious, and rule-breaking. Advertisers represent a carnival which overthrows the world and liberates it from social norms. Within this context, people possess another kind of shared reality. This shared reality is different from the one people share in their conventional way. There are no boundaries between bodies, or good and bad food. Advertisers toss out conventional rules and meanings we follow in our world in order to promote the "bad" food. In the ad, the "bad" drink becomes the "cool" drink.

This definition of good and bad turns into a question of relative positioning. In the world of the ad, people share a belief that the soda is in fact a "cool" drink. The meaning is given and attached through the images advertisers connect with the product. They define what it means to be cool, and this becomes the selling point. The commercial possesses a completely different universe from the one where our daily lives take place. This ad represents an alternative reality through its depiction of young people and the activity they do in the park.

To the young people in the ad, the body transformation is not an unusual spectacle. Nobody stares when they see Jay Chou and Angela Chang turn into splashes of water. It seems like nothing is wrong when people bump into each other and turn into water. The young people share the world in which what has happened to Jay Chou and Angela Change is considered natural and normal.

Bakhtin stated that carnival is not a spectacle. People participate in it because they live in this universe: "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very

idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants" (Rabelais, p. 7). Bakhtin brought up a positive perspective of carnival. *Carnivalesque* represents an alternative reality, a world that is independent of the ordinary hierarchic one, and a chance to liberate, to deconstruct, and to renew. It implies that carnival possesses a power of social transformation.

There are no seemingly "superior" characters in the ad. The people in the park are all young people. The authoritative figures are absent in this world. No one challenges the upper class because there is no sense of class in this world. The park is a place where a teenage utopia takes place. Advertisers depict a world based on the taste of young people, a world without parents (or their elders) and discipline.

The ad portrays a teenage carnival. However, the other features of *carnivalesque* remain untouched. The world remains unchanged. The ad is not able to illustrate the ability of *carnivalesque* to overthrow the rules and norms in society. In order to have a thorough analysis of the grotesqueness and *carnivalesque* in junk food commercials, I wish to bring up another case example.

Case Example 2

Doritos' commercial is always depicted with fun and creativity in Taiwan. The tortilla chips are represented as a kind of food that people can share with friends. In a commercial, the advertisers depict a young man, who is about to eat the snack while entering the MRT station. This act draws the attention of the security guard in the station. When the guard tries to redress the young man, the young man starts to dance in and out of the line that says "No Drinks, No Food." The guard can neither catch him nor punish him because he does not really eat in the station. In the end, the young man finally stops dancing in and out of the line, and walks out the station with pride. The ad ends with a slogan which says, "Emboldened by Creative Thought!" (有靈感我就敢)

Picture 2. The commercial of Doritos

Analysis

In the beginning of the ad, when the young man takes a bag of *Doritos* with him, the guard immediately pays attention to him. No drinks and foods are allowed in the MRT station in Taipei. The guard plays the role of surveillance in order to make sure that nobody breaks the rule. The guard is an apparatus of checking. He makes sure that everything is okay in the station. When the young man is about to cross the line and enter the guard's territory of surveillance, he is threatened by the action of the guard. The guard points at him, and tries to redress him for punishment.

The guard plays the role of certain authoritative figure. However, the snack seems to give the young man a power to challenge the guard. In the commercial, this violation is portrayed as energetic and creative. People cheer the young man for his disobedience. The guard is the only one who finds the action of the

young man irritating. When the young man dances in and out of the line, he does not belong to either side, or maybe he belongs to both. He is in an in-between zone.

The grotesqueness in this commercial is not about the outward appearance of the young man. It is about the body behavior that breaks the norms regulating the civilized body. He interacts with two universes: one is the world inside the station which no one can eat and drink, and the other is the world outside, though it still has its own limitations. He challenges the guard with his dancing, and the guard can do nothing because he flows between the inside and the outside. He possesses his own ambiguous universe above the restriction line.

Making a Grotesque World of One's Own

The young man establishes his own grotesque world through his dancing area above the line. In the ad, the only liminal space is the area above the restriction line which separates two worlds. The young man creates a grotesque world of his own. The guard could only try to catch him when he dances into "the inside" of the station. Within this ambiguous area, the young man could subvert and overthrow the conventional rules without actually offending others. All the rules can be abandoned and ignored in this zone.

The young man could make play of attacking to the guard through his dance movement. His body is out-stretched and relaxing. However, the guard does not share the young man's universe. Therefore, the viewer could see their conflict in the ad. Advertisers suggest that the only way for them to be in the same universe is to eat the chips. By eating *Doritos*, the young man is given the power to challenge the authority and create his own world. It gives him inspiration to be a person who does not follow the conventional social norms.

In the end of the commercial, when the guard has a bite of *Doritos*, he crosses the restriction line. He himself also violates the rules in the station. Advertisers also use some funny depiction to portray his body image after he eats. The guard is depicted as a man who spews out fire after eating the snack. Though the tortilla chips are spicy, it is unbelievable that a man could spew fire just because he eats something spicy. It is not a normal body reaction.

Picture 3. The guard also breaks the rule in the end of the ad.

After eating the chips, the guard seems to be able to appreciate the grotesque world of the young man. He also enters this "in-between" universe through the eating of the chips. He no longer thinks that eating in the station is an act of violation. He and the young man share the same universe above the restriction line. Advertisers imply that eating the chips is a way to be disobedient and create a world of one's own. The commercial successfully connects the product with teenage culture through the depiction of teenage rebellion and creativity. It shows its target buyers that *Doritos* can be their source of inspiration and creativity.

Back to the Ordinary World: A Short-term Release from the Conventional World?

This commercial represents the mainstream attitude about the young people in our society. They are thought to be rebellious and creative. It is boring for them to just follow every rule in their life. The ad implies that people could always have a pack of chips when they want some inspiration and fun. It is also a kind of release from a stressful life of maintaining a normal and civilized body.The commercial suggests its audience that it is liberating to eat junk food sometimes. It could neutralize the tension of ordinary life. It allows people to be a little rebellious and relaxing once in a while. However, the ad does not believe this kind of relief can solve the problem once and for all.

The young man cannot be in his in-between zone forever. He has to get into/out of the line in the end. In the end of the commercial, he chooses to walk out of the station. By walking out of the station, he does not have to follow the rules of it. Nevertheless, he still has to follow the rules outside the station. Once he has done eating the chips, the grotesqueness of his body and the liminal world he creates seems to disappear. He has to, inevitably, go back to his ordinary world.

The young man's grotesque body (in terms of his body behaviors) does not promise the chance to transform society like the Bakhtinian one. It is just a short-term relief of life through a tiny rebellious act. Advertisers connect two rebellious acts together (eating junk food and violating the rules in the MRT) in order to persuade its target buyers that the product is fun-giving as well as inspiration-giving. However, this short-term relief does not free people from the enslavement of the classical body. People have to go back to the "normal" state in the end.

The idea of the grotesque body in the ad could not stand on its own without the opposite idea of the classical body (i.e. the ideal fit body in modern time). If there were no such figure as the security guard in the station, none of the acts of the young man would be regarded as meaningful. The grotesque body in the ad is not the Baktinian one which could challenge the hierarchical conventions in society. It has a symbiotic relationship with the classical one. Each one cannot exist without the other. The grotesque body in food commercials represents a way to get away from the rules and norms for a while. However, no one can really overthrow these regulations and remain grotesque forever.

Conclusion

This paper indicates that the grotesque body in food advertising is just a momentary suspension from the norms and rules in society. Owing to this suspension, eating junk food is a celebration of creative thoughts. Our conception of a healthy body is also suspended by the advertisers' strategy to sell products.

The grotesque body in food advertising is different from the Bakhtinian one. What advertisers try to convey in the ads is a short-term release from our regulative and stressful life. Through being temporarily grotesque (by consuming the food), each one has a chance to indulge in his or her universe. In food advertising, eating becomes a ritual. People can change their bodies through the food they eat. In this ritual, food becomes the agent of change in the commercials. Though the change may be temporary, the commercials still sell the bad food with a depiction of the grotesque body successfully.

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