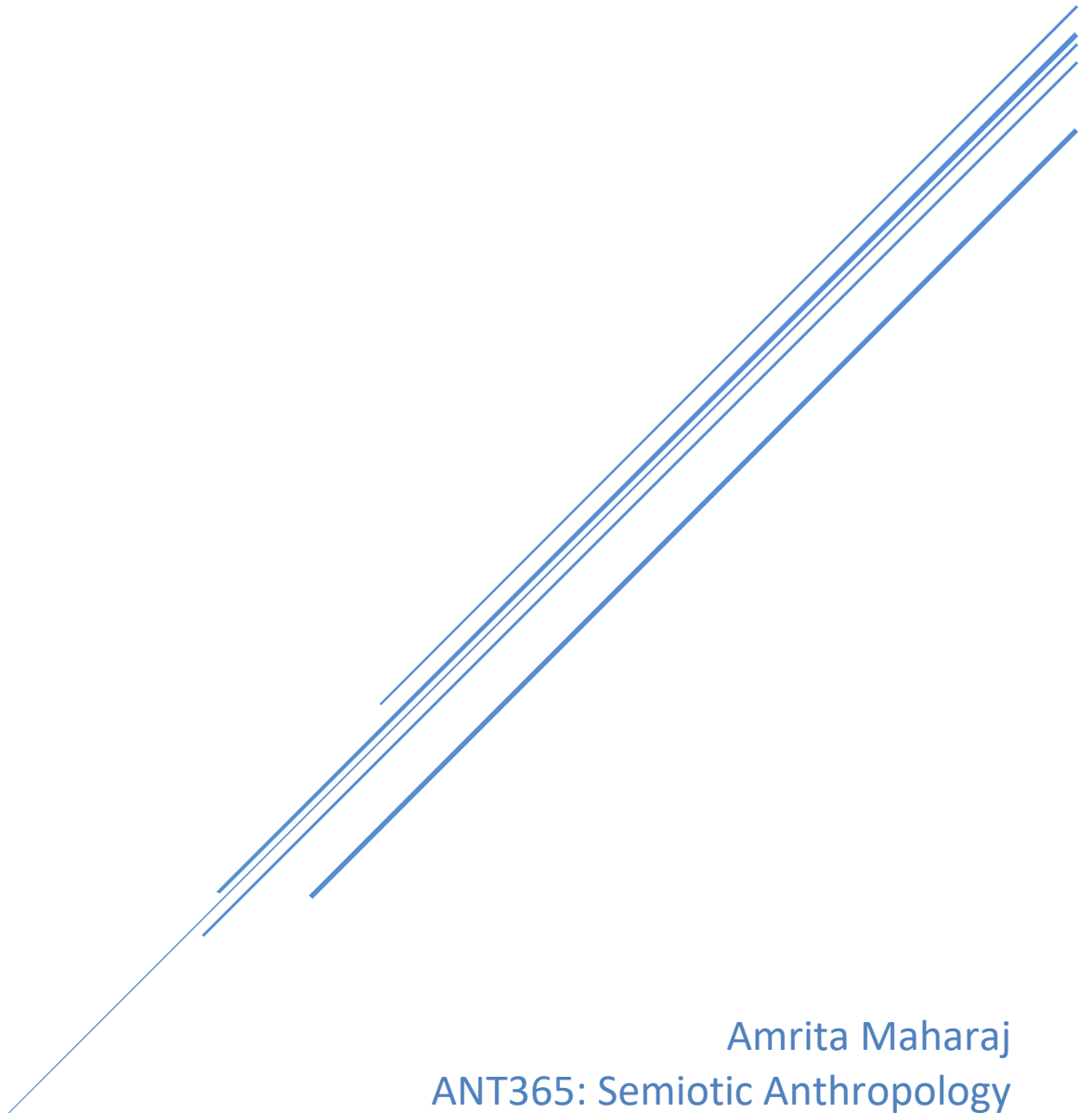


FOOD

A Mediated Experience



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Introduction

Food is something we need for survival. However, the ways in which food is experienced in our society is more than for nourishment and sustenance. It is imbued with meaning. Food has social and cultural codes that go beyond survival instincts that governs our perceptions of edibility. In semiotics food is both denotative and connotative. On the denotative level food is a survival substance. On the connotative level, food and eating take on a whole range of meanings. The term that is used to describe these organizations of connotations that food evokes is *cuisine*. Cuisine “informs us as to what certain people eat, how they make it, and what it reveals about them” (Danesi, 2004. p. 194). Restaurants rely on our knowledge of cuisine in order to offer consumers different experiences. In this paper I will be looking at two types of restaurants: the fast food chain, McDonald’s and fine dining at Wildfire Steakhouse and Wine Bar. I will analyse three components of these restaurants: architecture, atmosphere, and food codes to determine how semiotics is used to mediate the experience of the customers through food.

Architecture

Architecture is used to convey meaning and impose order on space. It symbolizes the primary functions of the building and can be used to mediate experiences. Restaurants use spatial codes through architecture in order to encode certain behaviours into consumers. These codes give them social knowledge (how to behave, lingo, etc.) on expectations in these spaces and textual knowledge (how to read the menu) in order to make sense of the signs in the restaurant.



Figure 1. McDonald's Counter and Menu

Fast food chains such as McDonalds use the spatial layout of the restaurant to embed ideals of consumerist culture. Everything is done at a fast pace in

order to meet the time constraints of the busy consumers. There is even a drive-thru experience for those “on-the-go” who cannot afford the luxury of waiting for food inside. Inside the building you are lead to a central area where the menu is built in to the environment. Your gaze is directed up and a quick scan of the menu is done to decide on your purchase. Lines are formed and you approach a person behind a counter to place your order which is decided beforehand. Your order is taken and if you stumble or are unsure, there are prompts that the cashiers use to help you out.

Figure 2. McDonald's Seating



When your order is placed, you instinctually follow the other patrons standing at the side anxiously waiting for their food to arrive. If you choose to dine-in you must first find an available spot to sit. Patrons are met with uncomfortable chairs made of hard plastic, that signify you won't be staying long, and plain table tops with no decoration. The layout of the seating tries to fit as many patrons as it can giving a feeling of a communal space. The whole experience is over quickly as designed by the restaurant in order to satisfy hunger in the most economical way. An additional feature to McDonalds is the Playplace a miniature amusement area for children. Parents can take time out of their busy schedule to enjoy a family meal with their children. This image reinforces family values into the McDonald's franchise entrenching it throughout society.

Wildfire Steakhouse & Wine Bar Restaurant is a completely different experience. The layout of the restaurant is crafted to convey luxury, indulgence, and leisure. Before you can visit such a place a reservation must be made, this conveys that spaces are a limited resource, creating a false scarcity and hence the idea of an exclusive experience. Upon entering the building you must wait to be greeted and seated by the hostess. Unlike the fast food restaurant where seating is

Figure 3. Wildfire Seating



first come first serve, most fine dining restaurants require that you wait to be seated. You are lead to a table prepared “just for you”. Tables may have a table cloth, depending on the location, and a candle for décor. The table is pre-set with cutlery, glasses (for wine and water), and plates. Menus are given by the hostess and patrons wait for a server who will take care of their order. Seats are comfortable with cushioned pillows, signifying leisure and you will be staying for an extended period, and ordering is done at the patrons pace. The entire layout of the restaurant is designed to convey luxury and leisure to the patrons. The seating arrangement at Wildfire is designed host a limited amount of patrons at a time, creating an individualized space for patrons to enjoy their experience. The whole dining experience is designed as an event to savour the food and indulge in the luxury of the items.

Atmosphere

The atmosphere of both restaurants are conveyed to their target customers through the use of colour, lighting, wait times, and noise levels. At McDonald’s bright colours are used to attract attention and to be inviting to consumers. The use of red is used to draw attention to the

Figure 4. McDonald's Interior



building. The colour red has a “powerful impact on ones personality and emotions...[and] it is popularly used by product designers and advertisers to highlight objects of importance” (Singh, 2011, p. 201) The yellow signifies “a

happy and cheerful disposition of the mind...[and also] represents sociability and friendship” (Singh, 2011, p. 202). The atmosphere is generally congenial and the food is affordable, and thus a favourite spot for families or friends. The use of these colours as signifiers are used to influence the consumer’s choices, emotions, and how they see things. For example, when travellers from North America see the golden arches in a foreign country, it signifies McDonald’s. They experience feelings of comfort, familiarity, and a piece of home. Wildfire on the other hand uses colours that are dark to create a sense of exclusivity and luxury. The use of black conveys power, sophistication, and elegance. Coupled with brown and white it further signifies concepts such as richness, tradition, peace and tranquility (Singh, 2011, p. 202). The atmosphere of Wildfire is one of indulgence and attracts a certain clientele that can afford the costly prices for a meal.

Figure 5. Wildfire Interior



Lighting in both places are different with McDonalds being brightly lit and a communal atmosphere, Wildfire is dimly lit and conveys opulence and an intimate experience with close friends and family. Noise levels also differ in both places. Televisions are placed at different locations around McDonalds with music playing in the background. Boisterous conversations can be heard by high school students or retirees meeting with friends for breakfast signifying the communal nature of the environment. Wildfire is subdued with light jazz playing in the background and conversations are muted and kept within reach of the table signifying the individualized experience of the atmosphere. Finally, wait times for food further cement the different clientele and atmosphere of each place. Speed and accuracy is vital to the busy environment of McDonalds with patrons complaining after a few minutes of waiting for their

food. However, these traits are not something present at Wildfire, with patrons taking their time choosing and waiting for their food. In fact, wait times at fine dining restaurants are a common occurrence with patrons willing to wait up to two hours to dine there. Reservations at fine dining are usually a requirement and most do not take walk-in patrons. Again, this highlights the scarcity of space that these establishments seek to create. When I called to book my reservation for Wildfire, I was asked if I was celebrating an occasion and I indicated it was my wedding anniversary. At the end of our meal we received a free dessert with sparklers and a card from management wishing my husband and me “a happy anniversary.” This gesture adds to the individualized experience mentioned earlier and creates a bond between the place and the consumer.

Food Codes

Food codes are an important aspect of our society because they regulate practices and expectations around food. They determine what kinds of food are eaten, when they are eaten, who is allowed to eat them etc. Food codes such as price and portion sizes are important in our society. They tell us about the type of people engaging in these places and what society judges as acceptable consumption. Patrons dining at McDonalds are not concerned with eating healthy but satisfying hunger in their busy lives. Those dining at Wildfire can afford to be picky and indulge in seasonal items and exotic foods to satisfy their need for exclusivity.

The price of food determines the quality and how much you care about your lifestyle. High prices of food attract a certain type of clientele that excludes specific groups in society, who cannot afford to pay for relatively little in return. In exchange you gain social status as being able to partake in such opulence reserved only for the upper class. Low prices of food signifies affordability and includes a wider variety of people in society. The cost of engaging in lower

Figure 6. McDonalds Extra Value Menu

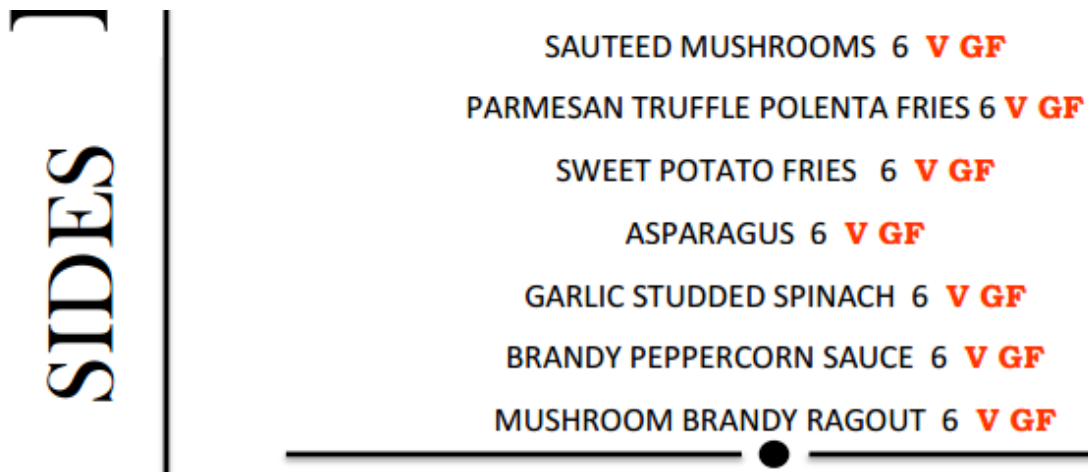


food prices is facing judgement by society as being cheap or not caring about the well-being of your loved ones.

Language such as “extra value meals” is designed to sell food “combos” that include items such as fries and a sugary drink. For a relative cheap price you can purchase an entire meal, albeit not a healthy one. There are options to “up size” certain portions of your meal for a minimal fee and coupons that give further discounts are distributed via mail or online.

Wildfire has no such language in their menu or website. Items on the menu are set at a high price and come with limited options. Any additional side orders are separately priced and includes only healthy options such as asparagus or garlic studded spinach. There is no option to “up size” your meal.

Figure 7. Wildfire Menu - Sides



Linked with prices is the portions served at each place. As noted above at McDonald’s you can pay a cheap price for a lot of food. The units of food at fast food restaurants is mass produced and made for sharing. It is a communal activity and there are no social conventions

around what time of the day this type of food can be consumed. This is heralded by the hours of operation by McDonald's. They are open as early as 5 a.m. and most close either at midnight or are open 24 hours. These hours signify the consumerist culture that is fast paced and always on

Figure 8. Wildfire Hors d'oeuvre



the go. Wildfire has the opposite of this catering only to select customers using only high class and expensive ingredients, for example, escargot and Canadian Angus AAA Grade Beef.

They are only open for limited hours, for example Saturday's hours of operation are 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. for dinner. Portion sizes are small, individualized, artistically arranged, and made for order. Dining at an establishment like Wildfire supports a lifestyle of extravagance and signifies a successful standing in

society.

Conclusion

In social and cultural settings food has become signs that undertake specific kinds of meaning. In the case of McDonald's and Wildfire Steakhouse we see binary oppositions that create meaning in our society. McDonald's signifies cheap, affordable, family values while Wildfire signifies expensive, exclusive, individualized experiences. Food is used as signs in culture to classify people into groups and create stereotypes within society that are used to evaluate people. Food has gained deeper meaning in our society than just a substance for survival.

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