

# The Experience economy: Innovative Marketing of Traditional Cultural Codes for Theme Restaurants

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**Abstract:** Along with the development of experience marketing and experience economy, food culture has been blending with theme marketing in order to attract consumers. Different types of codes have been applied to catering themes to form different innovative services. However, some restaurants have deviated from the traditional connotations of codes and transformed codes with adverse meanings to new marketing concepts, thus developing unique codes with innovative meanings. For example, toilet is deemed as dirty and stinky in traditional code concepts. However, in the age of experience economy, the filthy image of the toilet has caused the birth of a new type of theme restaurant that provides innovative services. In this paper, this kind of service is called Ironic Code Theme Restaurant. The purposes of this paper are: 1. Explore the values of theme restaurants and innovative services in the age of experience economy; 2. Study how ironic codes are applied to the atmosphere of theme restaurants and integrated marketing.

This research discusses the background of experiences, innovative design and cultures through literature review, and summarizes some theme restaurants with typical ironic codes with the aid of case study and semiotic analysis. With these studies, the paper concludes the operational tendencies of these restaurants. However, the life cycle of these unique theme restaurants is not so long as imagined and their particularities are still not clear enough today. Their life cycle still needs further studies in the future.

**Key words:** *experience economy, innovative service, cultural code, semiotics.*

## 1. Introduction

Creative industries have now become a global trend. Private enterprises have ventured various creative marketing methods and designs applied to the industries to promote their prosperous development. With innovative thinking modes, many restaurants have therefore adopted innovative operational patterns to break the traditional practice on selling foods; they have started providing different services with innovative operational concepts so that customers can have special consumption memories.

This study adopts the method of literature review and analyzes the meanings of ironic codes used in theme

restaurants in Taiwan to understand the relationships between ironic codes, food culture and environment building in the experience economy.

The literature review collects “experience economy” phenomena and related theories, and based on which and in combination with semiotic theories seeks renowned theme restaurants in Taiwan to summarize and analyze their meanings and atmosphere.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The Rise of Theme Restaurants**

Joseph A. Schumpeter in *The Theory of Economic Development* defines innovation as developing something invented into acceptable activities with commercial values. He thinks that innovation is the force that drives capitalism forward, because innovation activities cause a certain degree of destruction to the seemingly rational thinking and behavioral patterns, thus forcing economic development to go forward.

In his paper *Relationships between Service Innovation, Emotional Experience and Loyal Intentions*, Liu Jun-Min mentioned that a themed consumption location requires its designer to materialize the concepts or descriptions in his mind[1].

### **2.2 Semiotic Theories**

In *Introduction to Semiotics*, Ho Xiu-Huang mentions that “*For the purpose of differentiation, if the correlation between signs and meanings are artificial, we call these signs symbols.*” [2] Therefore, in people’s daily living environment, symbols serve to communicate some meanings or separate visual marks of different things; symbols are everywhere in people’s daily life. This study adopts the theory of F. de Saussure (1857-1913), He defines signs, signifiers and signified from the linguistic point of view. He thinks that the signifier is the pointing finger, the word, the sound-image; the signified is the concept, the meaning, the thing indicated by the signifier [3]. His definition of linguistic signs enlightened almost all modern semiotic experts. He is widely recognized by French structuralists as the real father of semiology.

### **2.3 Connotations of Anti Codes**

Anthology writer Václav Havel designed a poem collection named *Anti Kōdy* with his early pictorial poems[4]. The contents of this collection are thoughts of words in the poems on human, politics, reality and freedom. This extremity has developed its own meanings, forming the most exploration-worthy part of the multifold life of this writer, through the bizarre harmony of misery, penalty, glory and nobleness in his life. Therefore, anti codes contain diversified meanings such as anti-standard, anti-regulation, anti-monotony and anti-commonness. From this perspective, ironic codes are applied on the theme restaurants to show a comparison effect so as to prove that the innovative marketing with new code language is blooming.

## **3. Case Study**

In Taiwan, Ironic Theme Restaurants are gradually burgeoning in the age of experience economy. Based on the literature review above, according to the definitions of signs, signified and signifiers by Saussure, the author

has found five theme restaurants with ironic codes in Taiwan and studies these cases. Their innovative services and corresponding semiotic theories are listed in the table below.

Name of Theme Restaurants	Image pictures	Innovative Services Contents	Signifier	Signified
Lacus-Mummy & Coffin Restaurant		Uses mummy in ancient Egypt as the theme, and vessels in the shape of mummy coffins; in environmental design, Egypt culture, bats and cobwebs create a weird and horrible atmosphere.	Mummy	Ancient Egypt culture
			Coffin	Death, inauspicious
			Bat	Darkness
			Cobweb	Scarcely visited
			Skeletons	Death, frightening
D.S- Music Restaurant		Uses hospital scenarios as the theme of the restaurant; special iron racks are used as tables, while tea and drinks are served with dripping bottles; waiters wear uniforms of doctors and nurses; consumers feel like in a real hospital.	Hospital	Sickness, departure, weakness
			Sickbed	Sick, wounded
			Bat	Sick, wounded, weak
			Dripping bottle	Scarcely visited
			Nurse	Death, frightening
			Doctor	Curing
Coffin Restaurant		The sounds of coffin is the same as “official career and wealth” in Chinese. It uses coffins as its theme. Tables and vessels are made in the shape of coffins. The hell-like environment brings a sense of fear and terror.	Coffin	Death, inauspicious
			Hell	Terrible, sinful, bad
Demon Island-Prison Restaurant		Uses prison as its theme; consumers eat and drink in cells; each dish has a legal term in its name such as “probation” and “deprivation of civil rights”.	Prison	Criminal, sinful, evil
			Prisoner	Tortured, committed
Toilet Restaurant		Uses the image of closes tool to design the vessels for dishes; ice creams are made in the shape of excrements; rooms are made like toilets; consumers feel like they are dining in a toilet, which creates a sense of conflict.	Toilet	Dirty, stinky
			Excrement-shaped ice creams	Disgusting, dirty, stinky
			Closes tool	Excremental, dirty, stinky

Figure.1 Case Study in Semiotic Theories

#### 4. Discussions

The tables above differentiate features of different ironic codes used in theme restaurants, and conclude the meanings expressed by these codes with the theory of semiotics. As is shown in the tables, these restaurants provide innovative services based on the opposite thinking of these ironic codes from their customers.

#### 5. Conclusions and Suggestions

Literature studies reveal the interactions between cultures, the creative industries and innovative marketing in the social experience economy, thus further probing into the development of theme restaurants. Along with the development of experience economy and the cultural creative industries, food culture is also promoted. Creative ideas, however, are based on human care, because product values can increase only when they create values for others. *The Experience Economy* by Gilmore and Pine II (2000) suggests that enterprises should provide more values to customers, i.e. customized and unforgettable experiences [5]. Under the influence of modern development concepts, catering needs continuous packaging, image building, expansion and diversification and serialization just like space. This is the very reason for the rise of theme restaurants with ironic codes which provide special customer experiences. Through the studies above, the development tendencies of these theme restaurants are summarized as follows:

1. **Surreal Scenarios:** Create scenarios that do not exist in reality to create a special atmosphere, which satisfies customer needs to feel images that cannot be felt in real life.
2. **Ironic Connotations:** Create ironic meanings of traditional codes to build brand particularity and publicity benefits.
3. **Reflecting Desires to Contact Anti-morality:** Build an environment based on anti-morality behaviors. For example, people think of prison of a bad image, but they want to peep inside prison cells under legal circumstance, which causes the emergence of prison like restaurants. This may be people's new attempts to start breaking the so-called traditional taboos.
4. **Attempting to Create Counterfactual Scenarios:** People hope to contact counterfactual things that cannot be touched in reality in the age of experience economy.
5. **Employment of Ironic Materials:** Theme restaurants employ ironic codes in their marketing; they also use ironic materials to add beauty to the image of the restaurants and enhance their uniqueness and overall atmosphere.

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