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A Review of Socially Conducive Eating Environment

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Abstract

A tradition of gathering either with the family or friends for a casual or formal chatting while eating belongs to almost every people. We believe that such habit will endure and need further knowledge about an eating environment that is conducive to having social activities. Many researchers have studied how it can competently accommodate both social and eating activities. This short review tries to have a closer look at how far previous researchers have observed this issue.

Keywords: Eating behavior; Socialization; Social environment; Public space

Eating is fundamental for every individual. However, since babies depend very much on their mother to survive and grow, at least until they can live independently, eating becomes a more collective activity than an individual one [1]. These authors stress that eating together create a sense community and belonging, a feeling that people always need throughout life. Family mealtime is not only expected for children to get sufficient nutrients to assure their health and growth, but it is important for the children to adopt the family cultural values [2,3]. Such situation also allows every member of the family to interact and importantly children can learn how to socialize [4]. As children get older and have a chance to school, they continue to learn from the teachers, how to communicate and interact with persons they just know other than the family, while studying as well as during eating together. Here, the children also learn much about recommended food and how they should behave while eating [2]. Lee et al. [5] found that children or adolescents having more opportunity and regular eating with the family would have better habits and behavior of eating compared to those who rarely have family dinner. In addition, Kim et al. [6] said that having meals with family help reduce offence behavior, stabilize emotion and foster social skill of children. This fact indicates that social environment has power influence on eating behavior [7]. Knowledge or information about norms of healthy eating may be delivered through social interaction like family dinner or other social situations in private or public environment. In learning the particular norm, people may acquire it from what is being done or from what is left or has been done by others, said Higgs and Thomas [7]. These authors believe that public eating places can facilitate people to learn what should or should not be done associated to the norms of eating, such as food portion, unhealthy food and even body image. As social mediation of eating, a restaurant should be set up to allow guests to interact, communicate or at least see each other. In response to this, for example, family gathering or dinner is therefore accommodated in public. However, studies on the role of family-model experience in public have so far been done in schools. Coborn et al. [8] reported that by modeling family experience in the school, children's general health, happiness and social skills are improved.

To assure that children and adolescents grow safe and secure as a resource for creating healthy communities, the city should provide healthy places to meet it. Frumkin [9] said that there are at least four dimensions of manmade place, which are potential to be studied in relation to the above issue such as, park or natural landscape, plaza and city plan. In smaller scale, Oldenburg [10] coined the third place, such as cafes, saloons and other public places, besides homes and offices as an important place for the community to easily interact so that a social cohesion needed can be created within the city. One way to achieve that,

Rutter et al. as Bucholz [11] mentioned, recommend a warm, casual and friendly colored interior as well as, using softer interior and furniture material, well grouping furniture and cheerful decorations.

Since ready-to-eat-food are easily found outside the home, eating out becomes consumers' new habit, and raise a new problem. Warde and Martens [12] said that it could give a critical impact on people's dietary problem at large in the country. However, this situation seems inevitable because, industrialization of food, development of food and restaurant business, which all contribute to the country's economic development, are in need in response to the population growth, expansion of agricultural land, changing of lifestyles. Therefore, apart from promoting a quality food for consumers to select, the restaurant operators have to think of suitable eating environment for the customers to eat in.

Because people now use lunch or a dining event as a mean for various motives, including "entertainment, a means to display taste, status and distinction" as pointed out by Warde and Martens [12]. In general, we can classify eating out into two forms: we can have food whatever we want to please ourselves or to please others. In a social environment, the presence of others may influence what someone has and where to sit, how long to be, while s/he is eating alone in a café [7,13,14]. Therefore, a place made for eating in public, whatever the form it classifies needs to carefully consider how the social activities would be facilitated and designed. Finkelstein, as cited by Wardono [13], said that the eating environment should be appropriately set up to make all the guests dress, sit, eat, speak and behave which is necessary for their social activities to function pleasurably. General cues of an environmental character, which relates to behavior regulatory, are formal or informal/ casual settings. Sometimes, each of them does not show very clearly and easily distinguished, when it uses various design styles not familiar to the guests. Because not every person has a capacity to sense or evaluate a spatial character. Moreover, the differences of customers' economic class, sex type, age and profession, as well as the

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kind of social event, would the prospective customers hold may also define what an eating environment should look and needs to design. Therefore in the case of the upscale market, they easily differentiate from others or competitors by improving the quality of locations, brand name reputations, decorations and ambiances, food quality and price and service [15]. Despite all these primary tangible factors of differentiation, the restaurant atmosphere becomes the key selling point to promote, as the guests would feel it even before they choose a table. Indeed, in the past service economy, whereby people seek pleasure from the best service restaurant, as long as the facility is appropriate and convenient, the decors look attractive and comply coherently with the corporate image, then the restaurant would be accepted.

Today's customers are no longer satisfied with only the best service offered in the famous branded restaurant. They want more than sit and get all the service they used to have but expect a memorable experience from this eating occasion [16]. Eating in this experience economy has to allow them active in the process of acquiring the meal they order. In this case, the levels of action they possibly do depend on the concept of the restaurant offers [17]. For example, a noodle restaurant located at underground shopping district of Ginza, Tokyo, which is popular among the office workers around, offers an enjoyable attraction for the customers to compensate them for getting bored while cueing. It is a demonstration by the restaurant staff to prepare a cup of Ramen or Udon from the wheat flour preparation stage through a noodle making until it is ready to serve the customers. Since cueing for having a self-service meal turn seems to almost always happen during peak lunchtime, such a production show-off always becomes a joyful unforgettable experience to have. In such instance, all the environmental setting both the open kitchen and eating areas look integrated for satisfying the customer's attention so that every customer could feel a sense of community in the restaurant.

An experiential dining could make the customers more active in the making of food ordered. For example, the case of ABC Cooking Studio which, has hundreds of branches all over Japan, where the customers are involved and learn to make any renown Japanese food (e.g. Sushi, tempura, etc.) offered in one day before able to enjoy the food you just made. Through co-create food making an event, the customers would interact with other guests and the tutors more actively making this event a memorable one [16]. With such a new concept of eating out, all the customers' senses are involved throughout the process of food preparing, making and eating, so that emotionally it helps them keep all the experience stronger in their mind and memory. This evidence confirms the theory that people will remember events that touch their emotion positively, pleasantly, and arousing than those of not interesting ones [18]. Also, since previous research done by Fiszman and Jaeger [19] shows that past positive eating experience may give an implication to a future preference of food, the above evidence would be applied to support the need for regulating people's food liking or people's eating disorders. Furthermore, during the delivery of cooking knowledge and practice, it is highly possible that students would share emotion to each other how food is processed and tested to taste. Such "social sharing of emotion" according to Parkinson [20] may help people to strengthen their memory because they would tend to talk with a close friend about the wonderful experience they just had. Thus, active involvement of customers during consumption would be effective to create memory about the food, especially the experience of making it, which expectedly causes them to tell and promote their experience to more friends.

The concept of experiential eating expands not only how people get involved in the process of food making, as co-creator. It could embrace other food service businesses which address a sophistication of food creation that could result in a unique taste because someone would have to employ various sensory sensations to feel. People may eat food as a consequence of a delicate chemical reaction process called molecular gastronomy. Since the food is developed more scientifically in a chemistry lab with carefully calculated chemical reaction; the chefs believe that the result of it would get higher appreciation from nowadays consumers. Because, it not only tastes as most people refer but, it combines all human senses to experience the taste. In fact, the prime role of it relies on "taste, smell and chemesthesis" to relay all the chemical stimuli they sense from the environment [21]. These authors expect that this new science of cooking would be able to produce the best food product for people at large in terms nutrition, health, and taste. It might be potential that while experiencing such a complex taste, each of the customers would share their feeling to one another, so that enjoying such unique food becomes a cultural attraction, as it looks a kind of fun. This example may clarify what Holbrook and Hirchmann said that people would get compelling experience when the products and services served to produce various stimuli to appeal the customers.

Nowadays, people are no longer satisfied from benefiting the nutrient and medicinal substances of the food they eat, as also suggested hundred years ago by Hippocrates. As socio-cultural life becomes more complex, people call for specific stimulants from food to ease their life. Researches for finding further physiological as well as psychological benefit from organic food have been substantially increasing since medieval times. Citing from Prasad, Sarah explained that elderberries, dates, and quinces were found to be effective for enhancing mood. Also, chicory and lettuce are trusted to have sedative effect. Furthermore, eggs, beefs, pomegranates and apples can stimulate eroticism. However, in general, mood-enhancing function of food works depending on the food condition consumed, as well as the consumers' age and eating past experience according to some researchers as Sarah cited. Mood or emotional condition of subject influences how they select food. Some findings show that people choose unhealthy food or drink because of bad mood or tempered. They found that in a bad mood people usually think simple, therefore unhealthy food such as, chocolate compared to grapes, can easily be chosen to satisfy their taste. On the other hand, in a good mood, people tend to think for long term effects of the food selected and carefully select healthy food.

To get rid of bad mood sometimes people may want to go out and be part of social environment in public. Meeting with relatives or friends may help relieve bad feelings, and social eating becomes a common motive to mediate that need. In other case, problem of eating that suffers geriatric patients has called for Melin and Gotestam [22] to find a solution, and they found that manipulating the furniture in their ward has improved the patients' intention to eat and willingness to choose the meal composition according to their taste. Pilgrim and Robinson [23] noted that living and eating alone for most elderly has made them less willing to prepare food and appetite to eat. As a result, many cases show that older people has suffered from problem of malnutrition. Such cases again indicate that social environment is confirmed very important to regulate health profile of almost everyone including children, adolescent up to older people.

Eating out experiences of ethnic food is part of many traditional cultures even before fast food industry becomes globalized. In many Asian countries like Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, eating street food is prevalent and becomes part of many people's daily social activities. In Thailand, for instance, food plays a significant role in mediating social relations. Before dealing with anyone either for a casual or business

affair, they would talk about food to have [24]. Typical traditional ethnic food stalls in Bandung, West Java (*Warung*), which is well known for a culinary adventure in Indonesia for instance, mostly operate in a very straightforward and open interior setting that only provide tables but no chairs. Eating by sitting on the floor (*Lesehan*) and without any utensil to consume makes an eating experience more casually. Sitting on the floor allows socialization more relax and intimate. Also, since the entire restaurant interior, tables and dishes are made from bamboo material, as widely used in the village, an eating experience in such traditional environment also creates a sense of nostalgic and moderates a sense of togetherness among the customers. Therefore helps the local customers from the same ethnic origin to increase their appetite and meet their food preferences [25]. This unique example explains how a socio-cultural and environmental context of eating is claimed to have a powerful influence on taste appetite and food preference [26-28].

As a summary, eating occasion is indeed part of social activities. Therefore, it is natural that many people hold dining events as means of celebration. Thus, characters of restaurants, cafes and another type of eating events develop because we assume that customer' behavior changes in line with the development their lifestyle. Therefore, there may also be a developing problem of social eating that needs to be anticipated by restaurateurs and designers to keep updating a new concept of a friendly environment for social eating. From this review, there is clear evidence that a trend of establishing experiential dining phenomenon is relevant to consider. With that movement, more stimulants for the customers to actively think, feel and get involved in some food or other related promotion or production scenario seem to be challenging to face.

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