**Kinfolk: Our Items Make You More Valuable**

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**Introduction**

Serving meals provide opportunities to draw people to your home, where you can interact with friends and family brought in from across different social spheres. Through food, human beings can explore and understand different foundations of culture, and the social boundaries that are linked with what we eat, how we eat it, and who we eat it with (Julier, 2). Food brings about questions about moral and social cultural habits. The study of food, and how it is obtained, prepared, and served, acts as an arena for viewing inequality within culture, such as American food culture (Julier, 4).

Meals have structures which vary across cultures and throughout history. They have physical aspects and social aspects that represent different types of cultural communication between peers. While several close friends may sit down for a potluck dinner, for example, none of them will actually eat the same exact food from the same exact plate. It’s not necessarily the food that is being shared, but the ritual of social dining. Consumption in itself is an individual act, while the venue through which consumption takes place is often inherently social because of political influences, religion, or other cultural elements. Most importantly, consuming food, and consuming it with other humans who are also consuming food, allows people to enact social class boundaries that thus become visible through domestic settings (Julier, 5).

Meals rely on the presence of social forms. Social forms are “the synthesizing principles which select elements from the raw stuff of experience and shape them into determinate unities. These are not fixed, and immutable, but emerge, develop, and perhaps disappear over time (Julier, 6).” These forms act as the windows through which we can observe how routine interactions with other people categorize individual experiences in levels according to social class positions. For example, how formal a meal is, how the guests are expected to dress and behave, and how acts of domestic labor are divided reflect how people structure there relationships with others. These insights reflect their social experiences, rather than representing obligations that are rooted deeply within kinship (Julier, 6).

Social forms associated with food culture can become apparent through observing their emergence in various communities of practice, such as the Kinfolk Magazine community. A community of practice is a group of people who share a craft, passion, and/or a profession. Kinfolk community members, for example, share a passion for cosmopolitan, hipster-like cultural values surrounding food choice and meal presentation.

**Kinfolk: Turning Professionals into Cosmopolitans**

Kinfolk is a style magazine founded in 2011 with a target audience of young professionals, probably in their early twenties through early thirties. The magazine publishes quarterly in the United States, Japan, China, Korea, and Russia, and has reached a worldwide audience through their presence on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. They also have a website which contains information about the actual magazine, as well as short films and extra stories that feature things like recipe tutorials, lifestyle and family living tips, and personal experiences from community members. Kinfolk, therefore, seems to be taking “Foodie” culture to a new level by creating a platform where young people can interact and learn the “standards” needed to fit in which elite social norms surrounding the consumption of food, eating with others, proper etiquette, home and table presentation, and more.

After multiple visits to the Kinfolk website, as well as their social media pages, I have concluded that Kinfolk identifies with a growing societal view that the correct social etiquette and the presentation of the home and table may only be available to those who have the means to ascertain it. Such as with 19th century views on the woman’s role as mother and caretaker of the family, those who wish to fit into a particular social class, especially one of elite status, must make personal sacrifices (Brownlee, 202). For those striving to fit into the Kinfolk community, being a young professional isn’t achievable with the snap of a finger. It is an endeavor that must be valued and instilled with care, perseverance and adequate efforts for self-improvement and control. In order to learn how to appropriately interact with others in your social class, an individual must be willing to spend time educating themselves accordingly.

**Grocery Shopping: A Socially Constructed Experience**

The Kinfolk community takes mundane daily routines and amplifies their meanings to become complex sociocultural constructions. Specifically, Kinfolk takes otherwise normal tasks and uses them to separate people into different social classes based on how these tasks are undertaken.

Over spring break my mom and I decided that we wanted to try out a new recipe that my brother’s girlfriend had shared with me. We love to go out to P.F. Chang’s for birthdays, and they have this Shrimp with Candied Walnuts that is amazing. The recipe for the sauce, however, included a few ingredients that we needed to shop for, and that we were not necessarily familiar with: turmeric and coconut milk. The turmeric was easy enough to find with all the other spices, but the coconut milk was a real stumper. Usually you can look at the name of what you’re shopping for, or what type of food item it is, and take an educated guess about what aisle it might be in, or what particular section of the store. This time, we didn’t even know where to begin. We didn’t know if it was refrigerated, canned, in a carton, or what. Even the helper standing in the front of the store that is supposed to help direct lost and confused customers, such as ourselves, had no idea where to look. So, after calling for some help, himself, he finally guided us to the natural foods section. Finally, we found our coconut milk, although there was still some confusion as to whether to by the condensed coconut milk or the liquid coconut milk in a teeny tiny little carton. Both options seemed to cost way more than we’d expected, for the amount of product we were receiving, but eventually we picked the option that at least looked the most familiar as a milk product: the carton.

This shopping experience was unfamiliar to us because the product we were looking for was not one of regular use in our house. Therefore, the nature of the product itself and the cost came as surprises to us. Basically, we weren’t really sure what we should have been expecting. If we were to tell this story to a Kinfolk community member, however, they probably would have been able to tell us exactly what coconut milk was in a heartbeat. Furthermore, this would paint us as ‘outsiders’ within the community. Since we are not a part of the upper-class lifestyles that is valued by Kinfolk members, it would be no surprise to actual members that we are not familiar with more expensive, organic, or high-quality food products. In this kind of cosmopolitan, hipster community, being familiar with these aspects, and more formal styles of dining (and especially having the financial and cultural means to actually have them) gives an individual the necessary “in” to access elite social status. So, reflecting back on our actual coconut milk shopping experience, our ignorance of these types of high-quality foods becomes an indicator to the fact that we belong to a lower, more middle-class lifestyle.

**Being A Cosmopolitan Woman Means Being Organic**

Not much on the Kinfolk website is available to me since I am not a subscriber to the magazine, especially when it comes to the excerpts, interviews, recipes, and essays published under the “Stories” tab. During one of my excursions through the site, however, I made it a central focus to find out just what material I could access, and how these brief ‘web-exclusives’ give young people advice on eating, dining, cooking, home décor, gift giving, host-duties, and other domestic responsibilities. One piece I decided to focus on, titled “Simple Summer Breakfast,” advises readers on how to make breakfast into a special occasion, rather than a dreary, daily routine.

Kinfolk suggests that summer is a time for relaxation, so therefore, breakfast should be as simple a meal as possible: organic. Fruits, vegetables, and herbs, from home gardens, of course, are the key to pulling off these satisfying, simple, yet extravagant looking meals. Starting off the day with a healthy breakfast tomatoes or berries instead of greasy bacon and fatty eggs will give you extra energy and put you one step ahead of others who may not have had a more positive and invigorating breakfast experience.

In modern American food culture increasing value is being placed on organic options, thus perpetuating culturally constructed ideals of health and beauty along with it. In prescribing the fruits and berries as kindlier options than firing up the stove to fry some eggs, bacon, or hash browns Kinfolk is suggesting that by forgoing the actual cooking of “traditional” breakfast food, one is aiding their own health and beauty (read: “thinness”) by not eating food high in fat and grease.

As a young woman, I felt particularly targeted by this since I am constantly being subjected to beliefs and images propagating what the ‘ideal American woman’ looks like. This woman eats salads, organic produce, and above all, looks slender. I also found it interesting that while the author of the Simple Summer Breakfast exclusive emphasized preserving a simplistic formality during breakfast, they contradict themselves in the end by suggesting that young people need to put in extra effort anyway by going somewhere beyond the kitchen to eat.

Kinfolk suggests that we should “go beyond the ordinary” and make the “mundane extraordinary.” Americans have valued the presentation of meals since the nineteenth century. Eating became not a matter of nutrition or simple consumption, but an institution of culture through dining. The type of food available, how it is presented (what dinnerware is used), and who is involved in enacting the ritual of dining was an important aspect of social categorization. In order to secure a position in middle and upper-class society one had to know the correct forms of etiquette to follow when it came to eating with and feeding others.

It was weird for me to read this short piece, because even though I knew that these weren’t values that I necessarily embodied myself, I still found myself subconsciously wondering: well, why don’t I try that sometime? Why don’t I try making the ordinary tasks in my life extraordinary? Am I wasting my cultural and social potential by settling for less?

All of a sudden I was failing in my mind, because I was failing at Kinfolk’s standards of cosmopolitan professionalism for not putting in the “extra” effort. For me, at this point in my life, breakfast is about filling my stomach so I’m not roaring with hunger by the time my 2 o’clock class rolls around. Eating is more about sustenance and energy than it is about class boundaries and table presentation. I know that my friends don’t care if we don’t eat three-course meals around the island together every night, but in this context, Kinfolk uses their light, suggestive language to get into the minds of their readers and subscribers. They’re goal is to make people want to go this extra mile, and what better way to do that than to suggest that an individual isn’t doing enough to better their own life? Everyone wants to succeed, and everyone wants approval from their peers, especially people my around my age. Kinfolk, in essence, is therefore indoctrinating their community members to believe that in order to achieve social success and acceptance, they must acquire higher standards of living through eating and dining.

Turning to concepts of gender, the material provided by Kinfolk, though intended for young cosmopolitan professionals of all genders, seems more inclined to target and reach female audiences. I think this is partially due to how American culture views women, in general. Women are held to high standards of social status and acceptance, whether it be for their physical appearance or in their dispositions. In a typical Hollywood Romantic Comedy, for example, the lead woman would be light-skinned, skinny, clever, and well-dressed. This, I believe, is a lot of what Kinfolk values, even if they really aren’t trying to actively engage in gendered stereotypes. Who is most likely to sit on the patio and indulge in a breakfast of freshly picked homegrown strawberries? A young woman, because it is more expected of her. In American culture, males are viewed as the ones who grab granola bars or sloppily eat overflowing bowls of cereal in front of the sink for breakfast. And what would happen to the young 20-something year-old males who did try to achieve Kinfolk standards of cosmopolitan eating and living? In our culture, it seems that many would be ridiculed or be considered of having their masculinity stripped from them.

American culture is about fitting into certain social categories. Stereotypes are what social hierarchy thrives off of. Kinfolk, although just trying to offer lifestyle tips to new professionals, inherently acts as an agent to helping these kinds of stereotypes, such as gender roles and behaviors, alive.

**Conclusion**

In her book, Food and Femininity, Kate Cairns states that this Kinfolk’s kind of “Healthism” involves the moralizing of individual health and food choices. I am a young woman about to graduate college. I am not dirt poor, but I don’t have a lot of financial stability either. If I really wanted to I suppose I could attempt to engage in a more organic diet and lifestyle, even if it was only a couples times per week. My choice not to do this is what separates me from the members of Kinfolk. Within their cultural foundations I am ignoring my moral and ethical responsibilities about maintain my own health, my beauty, and that of my community. I see it as a simple matter of choosing whether to spend money on unnecessary products, but Kinfolk community members see my decisions as careless and ignorant.

Kinfolk Magazine and its online communities represent what Pierre Bourdieu would call habitus. His theory suggests that the development of taste in routine daily life reproduces sociocultural divisions. Those with high volumes of cultural capital have more distinguished tastes, and are more attuned to what tastes are accepted and valued in mainstream American food culture. Those considered to have low volumes of cultural capital, however, cannot obtain these tastes because they have no way of accessing them. They do not have the knowledge of financial means to operate, so the lower classes will always be at a disadvantage from being denied the opportunities to increase their sociocultural knowledge.

Human beings are trained to recognize dominant sociocultural tastes from birth, so it is quite difficult to change their views or capacity for cultural knowledge to aid social mobility. Kinfolk acts as a dominant governing body in modern American food culture. Their tastes and cultural views shape how individual human beings perceive social preference and acceptance. If they want to fit in with a particular group of people because they have an elite status within the American social hierarchy, they must conform to Kinfolk’s aesthetic preferences about eating and living. Not doing so would mark them as vulgar, or without taste, and therefore they would be subjected to disapproval from their peers. This kind of enactment of symbolic violence is how dominant American food culture thrives within such strict social boundaries. By following Kinfolk’s rules, an individual is proving that they are acting and living as a modern American cosmopolitan man or woman.

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