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Food and Fun for Children: A Circuit of Culture Study of Kinder Egg

Li Siu Cheong



(Source: <http://i.huffpost.com/gen/3930198/images/o-KINDER-SURPRISE-EGGS-facebook.jpg>)

This paper studies the Kinder Chocolate Egg (Kinder Surprise, born in the year 1974; and Kinder Joy, born in the year 2011). Kinder Chocolate egg, as a fun food for children, has been welcomed by children for decades. One of its most attractive features is that there is a toy inside of the egg, which links food and play together. Yet, as contended by scholars, throughout the production of fun food and child food, it is also a construction of distinction between children and adults. In view of this, this paper makes an attempt to examine how the process of categorization happens in the case of Kinder Chocolate Egg. With the analytical tool of the circuit of culture (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997), by looking into the production, consumption, representation, identity and regulatory? components of Kinder Chocolate Egg, we shall see the food product's articulation of shaping the children categorization.

INTRODUCTION

The Kinder Surprise, aka Kinder Egg or Kinder Sorpresa in the original Italian, originates in the year 1974 in Italy (“The Kinder Story,” 2016). It is produced by the company Kinder and manufactured by the Italian company Ferrero. A Kinder Surprise Egg is made up of a chocolate egg shell, a plastic capsule inside the chocolate shell, a toy inside the plastic container, one piece of paper in the capsule with the choking hazard warnings in different languages, a piece of paper with assembly instructions of the toy and outside a foil wrapper to cover the whole

thing up. The toys inside the Surprise Eggs require users' efforts to assemble, with just a few simple steps that do and do not need other additional tools to do so, which is a very easy task, especially for young kids. By incorporating the concept of "play" in food, the Kinder Surprise has been welcomed by kids. Therefore, it can be categorized as "fun food", which is designed specifically for kids.

The history of fun food can be traced back to the Ancien Régime in France, where children could have a "special tart combining food and play" in festivals (Mathiot, 2010, p. 108). This shows the association of fun food and celebration from the traditional consumption of fun food. Yet, as the idea of "every day is a celebration day" brought by modernity, and "the importance of extraordinary in everyday life", fun food has become an everyday consumable food product (Mathiot, 2010, p. 108). Fun food seems to be a loose concept, which includes different kinds of food in different categories. For all that, scholars have tried to create indicators to map the food into the category of "fun food". They include: "direct claims or allusion to fun/play on the package", "cartoon iconography pointedly directed to children", "tie-ins with children's television programs, merchandise or films", "the foregrounding of strange shapes, unusual colors or unconventional tastes" and "puzzles or games targeted at children", food products which meet a minimum of two of these criteria would be regarded as "fun food" (Elliott, 2008, p. 369). Judging from the criteria, one can see that fun food is also "child food".

However, the idea of "child" has been challenged by intellectuals for its validity to map a group of people to daily operations. Childhood is identified as a social, historical and cultural construction (Mathiot, 2010). In fact, it is found that "childhood" is created as a tool to exercise power in the process of social policy making and individual practice (Mathiot, 2010, p. 109). As a socially created category, works have to be carried out to mark such a boundary between adult and child. As suggested by the framework of "boundary work", individuals devote their efforts in marking boundaries against the outgroup members. These boundaries are called symbolic boundaries, to distinguish "objects, people, practices, time and space" for the purposes of marginalization, domination and subordination (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). Furthermore, it is known that food is not only for energy intake, but it is a "system of communication, a body of images, a code relating to usage, circumstances and conduct", as put forward by Barthes (De Iulio, 2010, p. 96). Thus, food also acts as a platform to make meanings, to mobilize symbolic boundaries and to shape identities. By studying the Kinder Chocolate

Eggs with the analytical tool of “circuit of culture” (du Gay et al., 1997), this paper endeavors to reveal how the identity of a child is constructed.

EATING THE KINDER EGG (Production, consumption, identity)

Fun food, is the food that entails fun values in reference to five senses, which are the sense of sight, the sense of touch, the sense of taste, the sense of smell and the sense of hearing (Mathiot, 2010, p. 110). The success of Kinder Surprise is of course contributed by the fun experience of the five senses. For the sense of sight, Kinder Surprise is in an egg shape, which is actually oval-shaped chocolate, subverting the imagination of egg. This corresponds with what Mathiot (2010, p. 108) said, chocolate egg is supposed to be consumed during the Easter season but now the chocolate becomes visible to kids per every supermarket visit. For the sense of touch, the chocolate shell has to be broken if one wants to open the capsule and get the toy. For the sense of taste, the Kinder Egg has a very sweet taste, differing from adult food. According to Schor and Ford (2007, p. 17), food for children is made unpalatable for adults. In other words, flavors of fun food are not found in staple foods. Therefore, the exotic sweet flavor of Kinder Egg attracts children. Senses of smell and taste are very closely related, and kids are fascinated by its smell. For the sense of hearing, the egg is wrapped in foil. When one unwraps it, it will produce an interesting sound which does not exist in other “adult food”. Therefore, these extraordinary features attract children’s attention and at the same time make the consumers (i.e. children) to be different from adults.

Apart from these, one of the most commonly found features of fun food is the re-appropriability of the food product. For instance, Mathiot (2010) studies how children consume fun food in their own ways. It is discovered that children reinvent their eating and have their own rituals. One of the kid respondents in his study told Mathiot that he developed his own way to eat ice-cream, of how to eat the ice-cream cone, which is different from most of the adults. For Kinder Egg, a breakable chocolate egg shell encourages re-appropriation by kids. Some kids would break the shell and get the toy capsule first, while some would break the shell into pieces and eat the chocolate part first. In contrast with adults, when adults eat Kinder Surprise, they would halve the egg by cracking the fused part which is made to connect the two halves of the chocolate shell, in a more organized way. The fatigue chocolate shell and the discovery (toy capsule) inside the egg increase the re-appropriability of the food product, encouraging children to discover possibilities. This echoes the fun food’s characteristics of uncertainty and

space of decision making, increasing the “playfulness” in the process of consuming the product (de la Ville, Brougère, & Boireau, 2010, p. 126).

THE STIGMA ATTACHED TO KINDER EGG (Production, consumption, identity, representation, regulation)

A child food is named “child” because it is designed for children. The naming itself draws a boundary between child and adult, as an outgroup. Junk food is discouraged by “rational” adults. Adults perceived that junk food is unhealthy, unpalatable and as “teenage food”. When food is characterized as “junk”, there is a strong negative connotation attached to it, thus, junk food” is equal to “teenage food”. Through such perception of snacks, junk food, fun food and child food, these food (junk food, fun food and child food) lovers are stereotyped as irrational, as opposite to the “rational adults”.

Snacks are always being criticized for being unhealthy, where the nutritional benefits outweigh the risk of consuming the sugar and fat. For the case of Kinder Egg, the product packaging design shows pouring milk clip art, which tries to connect milk as one of ingredients in The Kinder Egg recipe. Milk has long been seen as a healthy beverage, because it is high in a range of nutrients, especially girls and boys are experiencing puberty. Adults would still be able to denounce junk food’s unhealthy aspects, which stunt a child's growth. However, as asserted by Schor and Ford (2007, p. 17), while junk food is marked by adults as “dangerous, illicit and forbidden substances” Adults do not treat their junk food in the way. For instance, the soft drink Pepsi is known to contain the large portion of sugar. Yet, in Pepsi’s advertisements, sports stars are invited to be in there (especially athletes from high energy consumption sports) to drink the soft drink after work out. These acts aim to create an illusion, by putting sports stars into the advertisement, trying to remove (or reduce) the unhealthy image of the product. Although people are able to notice this illusion and describe friends who consume the drink as unhealthy, who would call these consumers as immature? Yet, for “junk food” adult consumers, just because the food is categorized as “junk and teenage” food, the consumer is attached with one more label: immature. This difference in treatment demonstrates the boundary drawn by the categorization of “child food”, and indeed, such classification is arbitrary, backed by the binary opposition of adult and child. The stigma aligned with “child food” or “junk food” reproduces such a boundary.

Despite Kinder Egg’s targeted consumer is kids, there are adults who compose the minority of the consumer population. One of the most attractive characteristics of Kinder Egg is the toy inside the capsule. This creates a group of collectors as the product’s source of consumers. To collect a series of toys, one has to be equipped with purchasing power, which is probably only possible to be happening to adults. This invites adults’ participations in the consumption of Kinder Eggs, widening the imagination of child food as to be mostly consumed by children. Such a participation introduces serious collection activities among adults and even encourages communication between collectors. Yet, other people would see the Kinder Egg toy collectors as “immature”, a word associated with kids. Since Kinder Egg is treated as a child food product,



where a rigid boundary set against “normal/adult food product”, once an adult transgresses the boundary, he/she will be punished.

CONVINCING THE PARENTS (Representation, production, consumption, identity, regulation)

Although children are the targeted consumers of Kinder Eggs, the product has to also take care of adults’ (parents’) perceptions. It is because adults (parents) are the purchasers of the product and usually not the kids. To see how the product is promoted to adults, this part will study the representation and regulation created by Kinder, making their products into parenting tools to draw attention from parents, who are the purchasers.

Figure 1: Picture of Kinder Surprise. Retrieved December 30, 2016, from <http://www.kinder.co.uk/en/kinder-surprise>



Figure 2: Picture of Kinder Joy. Retrieved December 30, 2016, from <http://www.kinder.com.hk/zh/kinder-joy>

To begin with, first, I will study the packaging of the Kinder Egg. The packagings of Kinder Surprise (Figure 1) and Kinder Joy (Figure 2) look similar. Both of them have a puddle of milk, with a few drops spilling out on the foil wrap covering the whole egg. This emphasis of

milk but not chocolate or sugar is intentional. This is emphasized because of the associated healthy meanings attached to milk. One of the largest concerns of parents is their children's health, so the claimed healthy nutrition would definitely catch the attention of parents. In addition, Harman and Cappellini (2014, p. 315) point out that in today's society in which parents who feed their kids with fun food are perceived as "lazy and unknowledgeable" parents, the healthy claim of fun food would reduce the level of stress borne by these parents. Thus, the representation of milk has a balancing effect of such an "evil food" labeled by the adult world.



Figure 3: Photo on the page of Kinder Joy. Retrieved December 30, 2016, from <http://www.kinder.com.hk/zh/kinder-joy>

Apart from the healthy image, Kinder produces an ideal family image to stimulate purchasers' interest. On Kinder's website (<http://www.kinder.com.hk/zh/>), there are many photos portraying parents and children having close body touches, signifying that a harmonious family can be achieved if people consume the chocolate products of Kinder. On the page of Kinder Joy (Kinder Surprise is no longer available in Hong Kong so I switch to Kinder Joy from this onwards) (<http://www.kinder.com.hk/zh/kinder-joy>), a photo (Figure 3) shows a mother carrying her son, both in a very peaceful state and with happy smiles on their face. This depicts a warm family after consuming the Kinder Joy chocolate egg, assisted with captions right next to the photo, conveying the idea that the product can be eaten, played, and even enjoyed by parents and children. In view of this, I argue that this design is for the sake of convincing parents, the purchasers. Different from targeting at kids, fun food advertisements which are oriented to parents, especially to mothers, are always encoded with "symbolic association with maternal love and concern" (Schor & Ford, 2007, p. 17). Through shaping the food products as parenting tools, parents' attention is captured. As a result, it is obvious that the photos on the website of Kinder are for parents, but not kids who would not be interested in such family portrayals. Furthermore, other measures taken by the company reconfirm that the webpage is set up for parents.

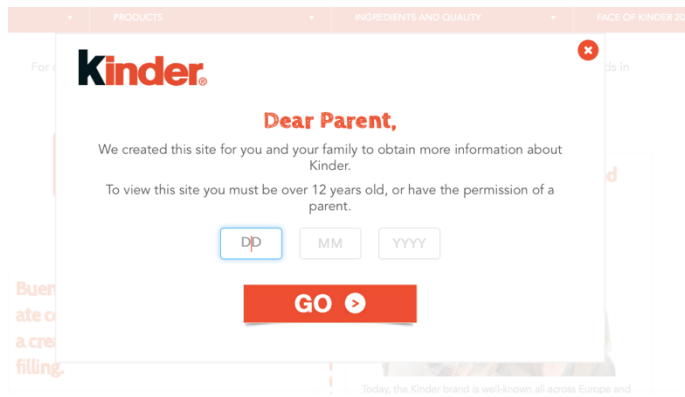


Figure 4: The Pop-up window on Kinder website. Retrieved December 29, 2016, from <http://www.kinder.co.uk/en/>

The measure is prohibiting people under the age of 12 from accessing the website. When one makes the first visit to the Kinder website, he/she will be asked to input the date of birth in a pop-up window (Figure 4) designed by the company. The window greets to parents, which assumes that only parents visit the website, stating that kids under 12 years old are not allowed to look at the materials of the website, while it states that the website is created for letting viewers view information of Kinder products. So this annoyed me a lot: why kids under 12 are not allowed to know the information of Kinder products? They are not discouraged to know but they are not allowed to know even if they are interested in knowing so and they eat a lot of Kinder chocolate every day. To solve my confusion, I decided to make a phone call to the company. What I obtained from their reply are two main points. First, the staff said that the company does not want children to be obsessed with visiting their webpage. Second, I was told that the company wants to create an activity that parents and children can do together, enhancing interactions between parents and children. Although these explanations sound nonsense, I contend that these are strategic acts. On the one hand, parents are convinced that this company makes a lot of effort in enhancing interactions between parents and children, making parents believe that this can also be achieved by consuming their food products. On the other hand, the company shows respect to the parents, forming a complicity in the growth of the kids. Although the food products bring happiness to the young consumers, Kinder puts forward the message that “We are on your [parents’] side. We respect you. The kids have to also respect you” to the parents. It is to comfort the parents that even if kids are obsessed with Kinder chocolate, Kinder will try to help parents to gain authority over their kids. Therefore, the alliance is built. Having said that, Kinder in fact shows the dichotomy between adults and kids, in which kids are not self-disciplined and irrational while adults are rational and mature.

APPEALING TO KIDS (Representation, production, consumption, identity)

For this part, the packaging and television advertisements will be scrutinized to see how Kinder Egg as a fun food to win over kids' heart. Child food is made for children because it is to distinguish them from adults. It is a tool of boundary work between children and adults. Therefore, in advertising and packaging child food, elements which cannot be found in adult food advertisement and packaging are present in those of child food.

For the packagings of both Kinder Surprise (*Figure 1*) and Kinder Joy (*Figure 2*), they are with the font style and colors rarely seen on adult food packaging, carving out the distinctions between child food and adult food. De Iulio (2010, p. 98) found that “bright, lively and bold colors” are found in child food’s advertisements, which are not usually found in advertisements on food products for adults. Besides, child food is designed as a surprise for kids. These observations are also valid in the analysis of Kinder Egg. As the name “Kinder Surprise” itself suggests, the egg is designed to present surprise to kids, where the eating process of the egg is like unwrapping presents, perfectly demonstrating the surprising effect brought by the fun food. For the packaging, the bold orange is the iconic color for Kinder, which is unlikely seen in high-class adult products’ advertisements. Besides, for Kinder Surprise’s (*Figure 1*) foil wrap, the word “surprise” is arranged in colorful effect and bold fonts, which presents a very happy mood to viewers. These signify happy and joy which are the emotions fun food products’ consumers are expected to have during eating. The design marks a boundary between adult and children, in which some color and font style are only allowed in child advertisements, while it would look weird in adult advertisements.

To study the advertisement, I will use the latest Kinder Joy television advertisement (the advertisement is embedded at <http://www.kinder.com.hk/zh/kinder-joy>) in Hong Kong as an object to study. In the advertisement, there are a mother, a son and a daughter. Then the mother gives each of the kids a Kinder Joy (the one in blue to the son while another one in pink to the daughter, the issues about Kinder Joy will be discussed in more details in the next section). After that, a cartoon Kinder Egg comes into life and brings the two kids to an animated fantasized space, where the girl goes to a forest and the boy goes to a space full of exciting transportations. Then, they are brought back to their mom and eat their Kinder Joy. After finishing the food part, they assemble the toys inside Kinder Joy and play with the toys. At the end, the cartoon Kinder Egg introduces the latest toy series of Kinder Joy, ending with the slogan “Explore a Fascinating New World” (探索奇趣新世界).

Similar to other fun food advertisements, this Kinder Joy advertisement depicts a fantasy picture for the kids, seducing them to experience the fantasy as if it is shown on the television. The cartoon Kinder Egg (*Figure 5*) comes into life and brings the kids to the unreal world (*Figure 6*) signifies the ability that the food can bring to the kids. The use of cartoon is an exaggerating tool, to increase the food product's capacity to function as "a machine for traveling in a fantasy world" (De Iulio, 2010, p. 102). The cartoon is not a real thing in the real world, therefore, it brings the characters in the advertisements to a virtual space outside of our ordinary life. The imagination is made to convince kids that something magical would happen when they consume Kinder Joy. Such imagination is important for kids to rationalize the world as "a world full of dreams, fantastic, entertaining and magic adventures" (De Iulio, 2010, p. 104). Yet, what is the hidden agenda embedded in such ideas? Does it presuppose that kids are living in a world which is not happy for them and they all have a desire to escape from this world? Is so, what are they escaping from?



Figure 5: The cartoon Kinder Egg in Kinder Joy advertisement. Retrieved December 30, 2016, from <http://www.kinder.com.hk/zh/kinder-joy>

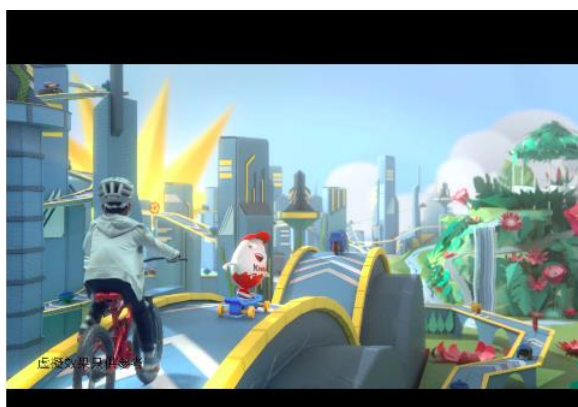


Figure 6: The cartoon Kinder Egg with a boy in a virtual world in Kinder Joy advertisement. Retrieved December 30, 2016, from <http://www.kinder.com.hk/zh/kinder-joy>

Adults' roles are designed strategically in fun food advertisements. In the Kinder Joy advertisement, adult's (the mom's) appearance does not occupy much of the advertisement

video. It is not a rarely seen pattern in fun food advertisements. Discovered by Schor and Ford (2007, p. 17), children and adults always occupy “separate and frequently oppositional spaces”, which in the Kinder Joy television advertisement, only the two kids follow the cartoon Kinder Egg to the virtual world while the mom stays at home in the real world. Kids go to adventure with the cartoon on their own, escaping from the adults’ control. Fun food advertisements align with children to escape from parents, which also can be understood as in opposition to parents because parents would like to know everything their children are doing (Schor & Ford, 2007). In the Kinder Joy advertisement, the mom only appears twice: to give the kids the Kinder Joys (*Figure 7*); and to give them the Kinder Joys once again when they are back from the virtual adventure (*Figure 8*). As seen from this depiction, the child versus adult boundary is drawn again. Adults cannot enter the kids’ fantasized world and the kids are escaping from the adult world. This is so obvious that the boundary is drawn, by denying adult’s entry to the kids’ imagined world.

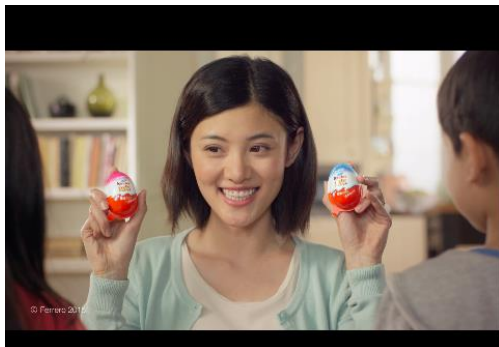


Figure 7: The mom giving the kids Kinder Joy in Kinder Joy advertisement. Retrieved December 30, 2016, from <http://www.kinder.com.hk/zh/kinder-joy>



Figure 8: The mom giving the kids Kinder Joy again after their adventure in Kinder Joy advertisement. Retrieved December 30, 2016, from <http://www.kinder.com.hk/zh/kinder-joy>

THE ISSUES OF KINDER JOY

In the following part, which is the last part of analysis, does not have much to do with this term paper’s problematics. Yet, I want to use this opportunity to mourn for Kinder Surprise. Kinder Surprise has disappeared in Hong Kong since a few years ago, the Kinder Egg in Hong Kong has been replaced by Kinder Joy. I want to raise two issues that annoyed me so much when I had a chance to have my first try of Kinder Joy.

First, the Kinder Joy is made into two editions, one for boys and one for girls (please refer to *Figure 2*). This annoyed me a lot that the toy I got from the boy egg was a toy watch with Chinese chess theme, while the toy from the girl egg was a girly ring. These are highly gender stereotyped settings, making appropriation that boys should only buy the boy eggs and the toys in girl eggs are not for boys. Apart from the child versus adult boundary, Kinder Joy now also draws gender boundaries. In the past, Kinder Surprise does not split itself into boy egg and girl egg.



Figure 9: The two halves of plastic shell of a Kinder Joy (Photo taken by author)



Figure 10: Two halves of the plastic shell of Kinder Joy covering with plastic covers (Photo taken by author)

Second, the design of the egg has changed. Kinder Joy consists of two halves of the plastic shell, one half with the chocolate and another half with the toy (*Figure 9*), which both halves covered by plastic covers to separate the two halves (*Figure 10*). Unlike Kinder Surprise, which has higher re-appropriability to do with the chocolate shell, Kinder Joy does not provide room for creativity to consumers.

Mourning for Kinder Surprise is just a small section to show my disappointment to Kinder Joy, a bad Kinder egg.

CONCLUSION

Inspired by the notion of childhood as a social construction, this paper makes an attempt to study Kinder Egg with the production, consumption, representation, regulation and identity components. I contend that the Kinder Egg acts as a tool to draw boundaries between children and adults, reinforcing the dichotomy of what is defined as adults and that as children. This paper, as a whole, wants to make a claim that food can act as a medium to form social relation.

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