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## Edible Brands and Literary Cuisine: Engaging Fanbase through Food

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### ABSTRACT

Any piece of literature comes into existence when the reader actively engages with it. Agreeing with David Bleich's Subjective Reader Response Theory, the text is a conceptual experience that comes to life through symbolization and resymbolization in the reader's mind. Each reader, influenced by unique factors, derives a subjective experience which may be similar but are not identical.

With the publishing industry entering unconventional areas of marketing, books and authors are turning into commercial brands with lucrative business possibilities. The food and beverages industry has contributed to the trend with an array of literary-themed eateries dishing out culinary experiences, complete with ambience and context, celebrating literature's most prized gastronomic moments. Branding here works with an unconventional audience not bound by common need, expectation or value, and looking for an escapade that will match their individual, unique responses to the text. Placed beyond the circumference of functionality these markets become even trickier grounds to tread.

In this context, the brands look for superficial agreement within the subjective experiences to create a resemblance of an objective response which is then actively communicated through the brand's verbal and content marketing media. The audience accepts the illusory Objective because it reflects parts of their subjective responses, thereby creating the brand's customer base. This paper aims to study this branding strategy through the analysis of three literary-themed eateries: Always Cafe (Hanoi, Vietnam), Gogol Restaurant, (St Petersburg, Russia) and, Sengoku Warrior (Shinjuku, Japan).

**Keywords:** literary-themed restaurants, branding, subjective, experience, marketing

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Branding in the recent years has transcended its industry-specific confines and is fast blurring the lines between demarcated marketing arenas. Running across several geographical and mental terrains, branding of any product is now travelling beyond the relatively easier traditional environments to enter a globalised space of rapid communication. This scenario expects brands to become entities that constantly engage with and are Visible to their customers without nagging. In order to attain such Visibility, it becomes imperative for the brand to strategize on Expansion for wider market coverage. With the publishing industry garnering notable attention and its long-standing association with cinema ably spinning marketable pieces of literature into multi-million dollar franchises commanding a global fanbase, books are no longer merely enjoyable reads. The success of a book as a work of art may still be reliant on its literary quality; however, as a product on sale branding encapsulates the Identifiers and catapults the book into its orbit of commercial relevance. In order to attain this relevance, brands introduce elements of the book to the larger circles of influence in sectors outside the traditional vistas of publishing. By this means, it creates a recurrent, interesting and ever-growing run for the book even in the midst of an extremely competitive and dynamic market setting.

The Food and Beverages industry has invested in this trend through a range of literary-themed eateries. Considering the depth and colour that gastronomic moments contribute to the text, from the feasts at Hogwarts to Mrs Ramsay's boeuf de Daube, literary-themed restaurants that can bring these cherished scenes to the live table are excellent economic and artistic, pursuits. The interesting conflict, however, lies in the fact that these textual Experiences exceed the culinary masterpieces and ambience that they are seated around. The reader's Experience is a complex set of responses and reactions that are subjective to each individual reader. Therefore, the way in which two given readers view the same incident in a text could be entirely different, at times in conflict. To understand this better we would first need to take a closer look at how a reader responds to the text and why.

In his seminal addition to Reader-Response Criticism, David Bleich argues that there is no literary text beyond the meanings created by the readers' interpretations and in the sense that the text the critic analyses is not the literary work but the written responses of readers. This finds its basis in the way Bleich defines the 'text' – the physical text being a Real Object while the experience derived from its reading becomes the Symbolic Object. This leads him to call the associations and feelings that we subjectively experience as we read the printed words as symbolization and the interpretation thereof as the resymbolization process. Thus, the text is the conceptual experience of the reader derived from his subjective symbolization and resymboliation processes.<sup>1</sup>

The reader, therefore, finds his subconscious engagement with the text to be similar to that of the player in a role-playing game where there is an attempt to preserve the strategy and competitive excitement without the personal hazards by stimulating more or less explicitly. The experience he derives from the reading and his responses to it at this juncture transverse the attributes of mere subjectivity and uniqueness to resemble his deeply personal reactions to what is happening in the text. He partakes in the momentum of the story and does not solely witness it. Even as he may accede to and consciously understand the 'willing suspension of disbelief' at play, the reader's involvement mandates him to have subjective opinions and ideas about the different elements that bring the story to life. In this manner, the purples and blues in the text become mauve and periwinkle, textures gain the favour of sensation, and flavours invoke people and dinners that were hitherto residents of oblivion. When juxtaposed, these ingredients transform the same piece into personal, subjective and entirely different stories for each new reader. Influenced by extensive or detailed descriptions and notes provided within the work, some components within a pool of such subjective experiences, however, may be shared by more than one reader. In the twenty-first century, the ease of having a discussion with the author through an online platform, interaction on official and unofficial fanbase forums et al may have slightly increased the tendency of readers to reach apparent

conclusions with regard to what the 'real' colour, look or taste of something in the text should be. It is, however, imperative to remember the superficiality of such agreement and discover the underlying dissent in the common answer. In agreement with the larger scientific context to which the roots of the Subjective Reader-Response Theory can be traced, the same theory can be applied to aid the understanding of Responses to genres that fall under the broader definition of literature, including anime, manga, video games et al, which form the franchise upon which Japan-based Sengoku Buyuden themed restaurant, which has been included in this study, is based.

At this juncture, a food brand based on a text with a common denominator to engage a fanbase seems too farfetched because the 'fanbase' itself appears like a half-truth. Brands, however, tackle this task with the tools of a literary critic to analyse and select a range of shared components within the larger pool of Subjective Experiences. These components are then represented as an Objective Response to the flavours or ambience in the text. Thus, where the middle ground between the totally subjective and totally objective responses are the most ideal points for textual interpretation, they become the basis for creating an 'agreement' in the case of Brand Identity and Perception. This Identity and Perception is then widely branded, advertised and marketed through the Brand's Content and Verbal marketing strategy. This would lead us to our next question – why would a reader let an Objective Response, if there is one, override her own Subjective ideas about an experience in the text? The answer lies in the fact that even as we deal with a single person in this context we are dealing with two different kinds of audience in her. The Reader is personally engaged with the experience with the book and the interaction thereof is largely private, resembling a conversation inside the Reader herself. Although she would definitely bring along some of the expectations and influences from this Experience and look forward to its resonance in the restaurant, she would rarely, as a customer of the restaurant, make an attempt to evaluate what it offers singularly on the basis of a comparison with what she had in her mind, provided that the eatery is able to provide some components that coincide with those that are part of her Mental Image, thus creating a balanced experience. The result, however, would be different in the case of a customer who has had a prior introduction with another restaurant with the same theme. In this case, the customer would tend to weigh the experience against her other similar experience, while she might expect it both to be identical, and choose the one that best caters to her imagination or requirement, depending on what she is looking for from it.

Although these references are more easily traced in the context of texts or pieces of literature, they also apply to Author Brands, like that of Nikolai Gogol, who inspired the Gogol Restaurant in Russia, as authors become products representing their works or trends and genres within the literary culture.

There are at least three stages at which a Reader-Customer's Brand Perception is influenced, thereby affecting Brand Equity. The order in which these stages influence are not necessarily linear, owing to the fact that the Reader might encounter these in different ways. Supposing that the Reader is first introduced to the 'text' itself, the first level of influence would be the Reader's resymbolization process that is a product of her previous experiences, prejudices, practices and belief systems, among other factors. This stage of influence directly influences the way in which she engages with the text and essays a role in her Conceptual Experience. It happens during the process of her reading and alters and settles within the time of her interaction with the text. At this point, the factors influencing her are not external.

The second stage of influence occurs when the Reader is first exposed to the Brand. Here, she already has a subjective viewpoint about what the product is, in the case of both the text and the author. She might also have some amount of knowledge about things beyond the text, through social media and other channels. When she is introduced to the brand, she identifies with the Objective Response that is widely branded, advertised and marketed through the Brand's Content and Verbal marketing strategy within the Brand Community, who form the fanbase. Even though similarities must have initially urged her to join the community, the Reader is likely to continue staying with the Brand Community even when

dissimilarities arise because the conflicts are more likely to be viewed as part of healthy interaction than hassles. These interactions might further influence or alter the Reader-Customer's perception of the brand.

At the third level of influence, the Reader is engaging with Brand Stories and other factors that are not directly a part of the textual experience. The interaction between the Reader and the text, or the Customer and the Restaurants, go beyond the aspects of both functionality and experience and become more personal. This phase can have a significant influence on Brand Loyalty and Relations.

The positioning of the brands outside the circumference of functionality is another interesting challenge for literary-themed restaurants. While luxury brands such as the Chekhov-family that owns Gogol Restaurant in St Petersburg deal with an audience that more readily experiment with an exotic experience, smaller cafes and eateries such as Always Cafe are entertaining customers who, though willing to participate in the experience, look for more tangible value in return. This difference can be seen in their individual Brand Images as well. Gogol Restaurant offers a trip back in time to visit a home in nineteenth-century Russia. The Japanese feudal-period inspired, Sengoku Buyuden offers an opportunity to experience to resemble a *tete-a-tete* with the pages of history. Always Cafe, on the other hand, offers a back room complete with memorabilia from the Harry Potter franchise. The menu too has its share of differences. While the Gogol Restaurant offers authentic gastronomic experiences from the nineteenth century Russia and Sengoku Buyuden plates parts of Japan's rich culinary culture, Always Cafe offers a special Harry Potter themed menu that sits next to a more general menu to cater to customers outside the fanbase. Similarly, while the online presence of Gogol Restaurant advertises the presence of historically relevant service, silver cutlery and live piano music, and Sengoku Buyuden offers a traditional Japanese aura, Always Cafe stays relevant to its audience with decor that stays true to its theme and club music that could entertain other customers. The advertising strategy used by the Cafe also involves a reward (a necklace resembling one from the franchise) for any foreigner who would write a review for them on travel planning websites.

Its location is another factor that sets Always Cafe apart from the other two restaurants. The Gogol Restaurant in St Petersburg celebrates the passion that Russian writer Nikolai Gogol for gastronomy. It also, for his literary audience, celebrates the irony of the man who confessed his passion for gastronomy as second only to his love for literature and self-starved to death. The setting is bespoke of the grandeur of his times and his culture and located in the midst of an audience that understands and relates to it not just from the level of a fanbase but from closer quarters. The benefit of this connection is that even if the restaurant were to have no literary customers for a week, it would still have customers who would appreciate the experience on offer. Similarly, the Sengoku Buyuden is a restaurant based on the Sengoku Warriors period in the history of feudal Japan and is based in Tokyo, Japan. A vast and varied range of literature has been produced around this period and it has been the backdrop for a series of video games that later expanded to include manga, anime, stage plays and magazines. The relevance of the restaurant stands in both the history and literature, granting it a wider market. Always Cafe, however, is a Vietnamese cafeteria that has had its share of success in a place and amidst an audience that is remote from the English culture that formed the basis for the Harry Potter series.

This contrast further brings forth the question of Authenticity and Representation in the branding of these eateries. It must be noted that the several reviews on the internet attribute a possibly Vietnamese twist to the Butterbeer and Polyjuice served up at the Cafe. There isn't anything wrong with it if we take into account the location and audience that Always Cafe caters to in a country passionately in love with local culture and cuisine and having very little exposure to English both as a language and a culture. It, however, leads to the forthbringing of differences in perception of how the 'authentic' drink of British origin would taste. It shows the evolution that Brand Equity undergoes with local influence. We find an instance for our next case when we break down the concept of Gogol Restaurant. Simply put, it is a restaurant that borrows the name of a writer who lived in nineteenth-century Russia and shared a passion for good food. He thus becomes

not a theme but a Representation or link of the theme with a very fascinating story of conflict.

The story behind the 'product' or service is another interesting catalyst for a successful branding strategy. Brand Stories resemble traditional fairy tales<sup>2</sup> and answer questions like: who, what, why, where, when, how and with the help of what<sup>3</sup>. They have a beginning, middle and end, and events unfold in a chronological sequence, which, when casual, is called a plot<sup>4</sup>. The credibility and execution of the story are key to its impact. The audience should be able to identify with the characters and the message should put the brand in a positive light<sup>5</sup>. The factor at play is simple but highly influential. The customer's ability to relate to the story of the brand helps him find resonance with the product. This resonance is the effect of altering perspectives about the brand itself. A conflict often propels the story, in addition to a quest for restoring harmony<sup>6</sup>. Further, a compelling story typically includes an unexpected or unusual twist<sup>7</sup>. Finally, the end, which is often best remembered, should emotionally satisfy the audience<sup>8</sup>. Depending on the story, the impact so created might be positive or negative. Interrelated brands such as the author brands and the literary brands brought into existence by them may not, however, equally share the impact, positive or otherwise, created by either of the two. Consider the instance of JK Rowling, one of the most successful author brands of our times, and the Harry Potter franchise. The initial brand story associated with Rowling resembled a heart-warming rags-to-riches story about a single mother living on social security and penning Harry Potter. Precisely, it is Cinderella—a story of greatness overlooked, chance discovery and eventual riches, as an article in the Economic Times once described it. It had all the elements of a great Brand Story and resonated with the story of the book she was marketing. As the world of Harry Potter transcended the publishing industry and captured the vast imaginations of popular culture, Rowling went on to become a brand of her own, sustaining it through her online presence, interactions with fans about the Harry Potter books, validating and contributing to newer fan theories and stories about 'the boy who lived' decades after it was first published. She has also often taken to social media platforms to express her political and social views, constantly engaging with her followers with quick wit and relevance. Rowling has, in the past, faced flak from disheartened fans across the globe over her reposting of transphobic content on Twitter, the most recent of the incidents happening towards the end of the previous year. It would not be an altogether wild assumption to say that her fans may have hitherto identified with her brand as followers of her work, the most popular of it being the Harry Potter series, and most of them that have stayed longest with the brand are evidently customers of the Harry Potter brand as well. The outrage on Twitter clearly suggested that a number of her enraged fans thought that such activity was 'irresponsible' coming from a celebrity of her stature and that she no longer commanded the respect and regard they once shared for her. It follows that she might have lost some of her loyal following over the post. Although a good review on her next book might still pull customers to the stores, the reader base may or may not treat her the same as before the incident. Though the initial Cinderella story would still have an audience, it would now be influenced by something more recent and less obscure. Depending on the climate of the conversation, one of these may supersede the other in popularity and the concerns of the age will determine which would stay more relevant.

There are two things that this instance can tell us. Firstly, it shows us how quickly Brand Perceptions among the audience can alter. Unlike products, authors are dynamic individuals who think, act and have their own sets of beliefs, prejudices, opinions and stereotypes. From an ideal neutral stance, it is possible to argue about the popularity and influence of these celebrities must prompt them to become more 'responsible' with their comments or viewpoints, in which case we would be making the error of perceiving them simply as products whose Identifiers are chosen to attract a target audience. In the event of successfully putting such a view to practice, the strategist would have to create an agreeable alternative narrative to the author, cutting down and hiding away every possibility of disagreement, thereby venturing to sell a plastic story that lacks both credibility and essence to captivate an audience. Undeniably, certain aspects of any story are altered to suit the audience, however, it is important to remember that when a fanbase looks at an author they are not looking for



flawless superhumans, although their reactions could deceive us to believe that a tailored, artificial gossip is what they are looking for. The understanding that people's experiences, opinions and responses are subjective and personal can greatly help us in accepting the fact that irrespective of the amount of planning that we may put into creating an artificial brand story, the entire course which a particular reader's perception may take cannot be charted. Therefore, though it might appear to be an excellent idea on the outset, it is more beneficial to try to project the impressive parts of a real story than to attempt to create an impressive but unreal one.

The second aspect that Rowling's instance draws our attention to is the inconsequential effect of this on the Harry Potter franchise. The viewpoints of the author, unless it occurs as part of her work, will make little or no difference to established Brands in publishing. Thus, objections raised against something in the book would be an objection raised against and acted upon the text. This further proves the relevance of Bleich Subjective Reader-Response Theory because it clearly indicates the distance between the two interrelated Brands even though one of them may have catapulted the other into fame. Such a case would, irrespective of its financial implications, negatively impact the experience of the customer who disagrees with such a stance and could therefore indirectly impact the business.

Brand Stories also hold a lot of relevance in the case of restaurants like the Sengoku Buyuden where a historical narrative is adapted into the folds of popular literature with traditional roots. These give a lot of scope for further branching and customer engagement.

In conclusion, the relevance and Visibility of Brands can be ensured through their expansion into newer industries where they might be able to share or pool their audience. Literary-themed restaurants present a possibility to leverage the Food and Beverages industry to expand Literary Brands of both books and authors. The problem of branding literary-themed restaurants that cater to an audience driven by Subjective and unique experiences can be solved through the pedagogical method of reaching the middle ground between total subjectivity and total objectivity and involving it in the Brand's content and verbal marketing strategy. Further, the branding can be undertaken to include audiences outside of the fanbase of a particular work or author to capitalize on wider markets. The three levels of Brand Perception can be used to strategize and understand customer responses; however, it is not possible to completely influence or understand because each person's response is unique to themselves. Apart from these factors, brand stories are a great way to engage a fanbase but can have positive or negative impacts based on the audience, depending on the story being put forward.

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