

Who is being exploited under the emerging culture of restaurant review?

- A case study on Open Rice

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Scope of Research

With the enabling of internet services and access, numerous sharing platforms emerged in an extraordinary speed. While social network platforms like facebook, LinkedIn, tweeters, weibo and many others gained its popularity in connecting and “socializing” people around the world, web surfers who share similar hobbies, interests or values are also being “pulled together” to form their own communities. Numerous websites which themed on various subjects like cosmetics, travel, food and health, entertainment and education etc have been established to facilitate chatting, intelligence and recommendation sharing among netizens with common interests. These types of open platforms, once accumulated critical mass, will soon become a media for corporations to reach their specific audience groups.

With the rise of website fed by user-generated content that ends up yielding profit through online advertisements, skeptical criticism about “exploitation” of free labour arising from the internet prosumption¹ is always invited. In this paper, I would like to take a close study of one of the most popular restaurant guide and review websites in Hong Kong – Open Rice, to examine whether the prousers are being exploited, and if the case is established, to what degree and in what form in the cultural context.

Open Rice, an integrated website which provides information of over 41,000 restaurants in Hong Kong and shares restaurant reviews contributed by hundreds of thousands of users, was initially established by a group of food lovers in Hong Kong in 1999². Until today, Open Rice operates in Macau, China, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand, in addition to Hong Kong. In 2011, its Hong Kong website’s browsing rate reached 1.8 million. As of early April 2013, its Hong Kong website alone has registered approximately 630,000 members and over 620,000 ratings and comments³

Open Rice is selected for the study due to its popularity among the community of food lover (which is now a critical group), the interesting dynamics arising from this open platform between the users and the restaurants under review and its tremendous success in attracting advertisers. By conducting an analysis of the content of the restaurant reviews and its rating mechanism, I will explore what kind of collaborative self is being formed and shared among the review writing community. From there, I will discuss what experience, satisfaction or even power is being garnered by the content-generated community that encourage their repeated visits to and participation in this platform.

With its low to no barrier in registering as a member/review contributor, Open Rice also provides an opportunity for people of different vested interests including restaurant owners, operators, workers and hired “network goons” to act as review writers in disguise. While food lovers help shape the public perception of the restaurants collectively, the restaurant owners/ operators could also easily

mitigate or boost comments on restaurants' performance by participating as review writers. This gives rise to further complication on what interests the reviews are serving.

Methodology

By conducting content analysis of restaurant reviews on Open Rice, we will see how representation of the restaurant under review is being portrayed and formed by the collaborative efforts of the review writing community. In order to enable a more all-rounded analysis, I will pick the top 30 reviews ranked at the popularity billboard, one review from each of the top 10 review writers plus 10 reviews randomly picked for restaurants at high, mid and low level of price. Foucault's theory on discourse, practice and power and his idea of "Panopticon" will be applied to examine how these online review writers collaboratively "conduct a continuous, anonymous and all-pervading power and surveillance"⁴ over the restaurants in Hong Kong. I will also look into how a critique/ recommendation culture is being developed or transformed as differentiated from reviews conducted conventionally by professional gourmet experts.

From there, I will employ the framework introduced by Christian Fuchs in "Class and Exploitation on the Internet" where "the process of capital accumulation on corporate social media platforms are funded by targeted advertising"⁵ is illustrated. We intend to use this framework to examine the relationship between the social media corporation (Open Rice), the users (review writers and users of the website) and the operators/owners of restaurants under review and the associated benefits/experience/ damage emerged from the activities on this platform. Such analysis will provide us with a foundation to examine whether exploitation exists and to what extent and if not, why is the case.

Analysis and Discussion

Open Rice, being an open platform for restaurants to post their basic information (address, operating hours, type of cuisine served, price range etc) and sharing of restaurants reviews, provides a user-friendly and one-stop guide for all food lovers. In order to appeal to the public, wide range of and most updated catering information is available such as upcoming new restaurants in town, special promotions offered, performance ratings of restaurants, group purchase, discussion forum and even cooking recipes. The majority of these information, if not all, are contributed by the general public in a form of a "free labour"⁶.

One of the critical success factors for this type of website depends on content. In order to encourage more people to make free contribution of their reviews continually, Open Rice has devised attractive incentive schemes to boost their participation. First of all, review writers are classified into five grades namely "Elite", "Pro", "Veteran", "Novice", "Rising" and "Trainee" (殿堂、資深、卓越、新晉、入門及見習) based on the criteria of the total number of reviews published, votes secured from website users, and number of reviews recommended by Open Rice editor. By achieving the top grades of "Elite" and "Pro", the contributors will receive more rewards in kind. These include gift coupons or discount, exclusive dinner or tasting party of newly launched or renowned restaurants and prominent display

of review articles. Other privileges include having your own URL and personalized review webpage design, inclusion of your facebook or personal blog account, right of direct upload (while others' review need to be censored by the editorial board of Open Rice before posting) and allowance for more photos sharing. Icon of "Elite" or "Pro" will also be prominently displayed next to the review to highlight the supreme status enjoyed by the writer.

In order to push for greater competitiveness among them, billboard illustrating the monthly changes of the writers' popularity is displayed on the landing page of the website. Similar judging criteria for grades classification are also employed for the adjustment of review popularity. Open Rice further allows the function of fans/ followers to interact with and attend gathering organized by the review writers. Visitors of this website could also easily share any favorite article through tweeter, facebook and mobile applications to your friends, acquaintances and family members.

Facilitated by this highly popular online platform, the website participants, be it the browsers or prosumers, gradually develop into a group with identity of gourmet searcher and explorer, who are willing, dare and care to share what they consider as important for best restaurants and good food. The emotional attachment enables invisible individuals to converge into a collaborative self and make their own sense of meaning to eat and to share. Through the tie of having common interest, these people are no longer alienated but to cluster into one community going beyond geographical constraint as well as the segmentation in real life by social status, education background, income level and political or even sexual orientation etc. The dialogue and interactions between the prosumers has extended from food appreciation to personal level. Thus one will witness the content of considerable number of restaurant reviews actually go beyond to cover the writers' personal life, hobbies and interests. One of the extreme cases, for example, is an inclusion of a poem created by the writer reflecting his recent experience that has no relevance to the restaurant under review.⁷ When I took a closer look of the details posted by the selected review contributors for content analysis, most of them share common articulated-self as explorative in trying new cuisines and restaurants, expressive and uncompromised in gourmet dishes searching. Nearly all of them claim that the core value of good food lies in quality and taste, not by the price it charges (as oppose to luxury products of which the higher the price the higher the perceived value).

Unlike the professional food critic or gourmet, Open Rice allows an opportunity for ordinary people who receive no formal training or knowledge as well as network or status among catering industry to share their views on the restaurants they have visited. By means of voluntary contribution to this platform with minimal barrier, the mass is given an unprecedented opportunity to share their voices on what they like or dislike from a consumer point of view in a public sphere. The exclusive status used to be monopolized by a special class of experts is now being liberated and open to all. Open Rice has started up a new arena for the invisible mass to be visualized through self-expression. The public is now free to offer their views on restaurants virtually anytime, anywhere.

According to Foucault, "...discourses provide ways of talking about a particular topic with repeated motifs or clusters of ideas, practices and forms of knowledge across a range of sites of activity"⁸. By using a unified framework and rating scale provided by Open Rice as well as plenty of photos, the social media, in collaboration with the review writers, set the new rules of game and define new standard for quality and high performing restaurants, the benchmark of which differs from the conventional gourmet and food critic. As the number of reviews, marks and comments given on a restaurant will directly impact the latter's order on the monthly billboard of performance, the review writers collectively exercise their digitized surveillance over the caterers in Hong Kong in a virtual "Panopticon" space – a power they have never enjoyed before. As the influence of Open Rice is overwhelming, restaurant, being an object constantly scrutinized by a consumer-community, will thus regulate its way of operating, managing and servicing to meet the benchmark set by these "powerful" mass.

With the emergence of Open Rice, consumer's right has been greatly stretched. "Exposed" culture is developed with instant sharing and re-tweeting of any sub-standard (or outstanding) restaurants among prosumers, as comments submitted, except for the proof of malicious attack, generally invite no consequence for the writers. The "exposed" culture further reinforces the relative positions of customer and service provider (the restaurant owner) with the former tends to exercise his right to a fuller extent as a consumer as well as an approver of the restaurant with no or low tolerance.

To curb fake restaurant reviews, the social media corporation has launched various mitigation measures including conducting random check, encouraging reports by netizens and disqualification of those accounts identified. In 2012, among 92,276 reviews submitted, Open Rice spotted 17,565 pieces (close to 20%) as fake reviews⁹. Despite efforts paid by Open Rice, one could still find similar to nearly identical reviews posted from time to time given its substantial volume of critics in circulation each day. Open Rice thus occasionally be used as a tool to launch intentional attack or retaliation to competitors by making fake comments. The risk of distortion on the performance of restaurant, however, is somewhat counter-balanced by the fact that it is an open platform that allows rectification by the "victim" through similar means. As a result, a natural equilibrium is broadly struck.

Interestingly, while the restaurants are under the scrutiny by the general public, the review writers on the other hand are also subject to evaluate and rate by the users and Open Rice editor. The writers are also disciplined and bound by the rules set by the editor, who takes a total control of what to be published and what not. The virtual "Panopticon" does not only apply to restaurants but also the review writers. To guide these amateurs in writing restaurant reviews, the editorial board has clearly given their views on what a quality review is by highlighting the importance of food quality, atmosphere of the restaurant, clarity of photos, length of the article as well as tone and manner. The creation of the five point rating scale on the aspects of "taste", "environment", "hygiene", "service" and "value for money" (味道、環境、衛生、服務及抵食)¹⁰ also help in framing the review "in shape" to be submitted by these amateurs.

While the public is liberated from the convention of critic culture by “authoritative” sources, Open Rice on the other hand establishes its authority through a set of new rules on its agents (review writers) which include quantity (number of reviews), “quality” (following the marking scheme of Open Rice) and public votes.

Facilitated by the technology improvement, public voting becomes a common tool to enhance the recognition of the website among web users. Online voting is frequently cited as a means of cyber democracy. However, this type of “democracy” is not without issues. To appeal for public votes, the review writers are subject to follow closely the popular culture in which dominance of photos, easy-to-understand text and popular jargons to be used etc. As such, from the 50 content reviews selected, not even one has any account that goes beyond the look and feel; and instant taste and smell of the dishes. The new style of review writing is nibbling the writers’ creativity, imagination and curiosity to delve into the food culture. Over-use of “extreme” (like “超” in “超好味”) and “super” (“勁” in “勁正” and “勁甜”) of popular jargons has replaced the rich and varied vocabularies found in conventional critic.

A new culture of food or restaurant review is being evolved and developed. The critic writing exclusively rests in the hands of gourmet experts is to be challenged and replaced by popularized writing by all walks of life, resulting in a relatively flat, superficial and instant evaluation. While the professionals “educate” the public with their wealth of knowledge on the history of the cuisine, style of cooking, characteristics and source of the ingredients, credentials of the Chef and sometimes even food in cultural context, the Open Rice review, however, is written based on what one sees, tastes, pays and comments shortly, if not instantly. From Open Rice, one will not find any historical background of why sushi is so popular in Japan while US’s diet is dominated by steak, burger and potatoes.

“Every consumer could be a review writer” becomes a slogan in practice with dominance of photos. “Seeing is believing”- with improved technology, photos of the restaurant and dishes become the key signifier that deprives potential customers from anticipation and imagination. A good restaurant that serves quality food is now defined not only by words but also by its visual appearance. Descriptive and highly personalized critic literature is to be replaced by broadly standardized and highly predictable adjectives for good or bad dishes served by restaurants. Taking examples of the popular and randomly picked reviews, repeated use of “stew with extreme softness” (炖得很腩), “incredibly chewy” (非常有口感), “multi-level taste” (味道很有層次), “full of smell of eggs” (很有蛋香) and “full of meaty taste” (很有肉味) etc are commonly found in reviews written by different critics.

The 5-point scale further changes the course of review writing to a mechanical system counted in points. By means of mathematics calculation, the difference between restaurants (food) is reduced to numeric that signifies the relativity of good and worse on a linear scale. If one still find the 5-point scale too complicated, icons that carries three different looks : a smiling face with yummy look; “ok”

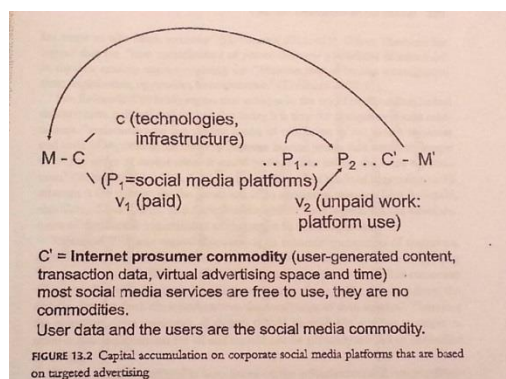
and “sad look face” will help further reduce an overall perception on selected restaurant to the simplest, resulting in reduction of the pluralistic account and description in review literature.

By inclusion of aspects of “environment”, “hygiene”, “service” and “value for money” onto the scale for performance measure, Open Rice has set up new dimensions for restaurant review that focus on dining experience in totality rather than zooming on food. In the past, these aspects, if not at all missing, only formed a small portion of the review. The addition of “value for money”, in particular, is a reflection of public in Hong Kong who consider pricing as one of the key aspects for consumption.

By classifying review contributors into different levels, review writers are bound to follow the rules set by the social media corporation. Through confining the manner of act and style of writing of these voluntary content providers in participating in discussion forum or sharing their critics on restaurant, Open Rice exercises its power over this group of “docile bodies”¹¹ and transformed them into a community that observed the rules set. With the grading system on review writers in place and measures that facilitate clustering of fans and followers, an ordinary people could easily turn oneself from a “nobody” into a “somebody” within a short period of time. Under the “stardom” operated by Open Rice, the sharing platform has been turned into an arena to compete (as the top critics) and a cyberspace searching for recognition and endorsement by all (Open Rice community). By climbing the ladder of top gourmet on Open Rice, the review writer will assume a status and identity that stands out from the rest. Driving by sense of belonging and achievement, in addition to other material reward, naturally encourage repeated visits being paid by the prosumers.

Christian Fuchs in his diagram on “Capital accumulation on corporate social media platforms that are based on targeted advertising” outlines the process of “how capital is being accumulated from the surplus value created from the technologies, paid employees and unpaid workers (users) in the form of “user-generated data, personal data, and transaction data about the browsing behavior and communication behavior on corporate social media”(Figure 1)¹². Christian considers that the free contents generated by prosumers/ users help attract or accumulate large number of browsers, leading to accumulation of surplus value (larger than the investment of the capitalist) that enables the capitalist to yield profit via advertising, giving rise to “infinite exploitation of users”¹³.

Figure 1



Christian's conclusion on exploitation is based purely on cash or wages in return for the free service provided by the "free labour". In this regards, according to the terms outlined under the "Disclosure or Transfer of Data by Open Rice", it has a high autonomy in sharing the information of personal details or behavioral data of members (incl. review contributors) and sold as commodity to advertisers. From a privacy point of view, the disclosure could be excessive and thus constitute certain degree of exploitation on users. However, as the terms have been clearly displayed on the website, one may argue that the users have complete freedom to choose as "to be or not to be". This is a common dilemma faced by netizens if they want to be part of the community of a popular website, be it the google, yahoo or facebook.

However, in order to have a comprehensive review, we should not omit the intangible return one will get from the voluntary participation or contribution of the content. In the case of Open Rice under study, even discounting the incentives in kind offered by the social media, the review writers do not receive nothing but considerable intangible benefits, namely sense of achievement and recognition, confidence and power to share and judge, free and updated catering information and being a member of a community sharing the same or similar identity and expansion of social network etc. Moreover, one should not overlook the fact that there is no contractual relationship between Open Rice and the users, meaning that the latter are free to stop contributing whenever they choose to. The surplus value created for Open Rice by the prosumers is not rewarded in cash but intangible value extracted from the virtual community arising from this cyberspace. However, in exchange for such benefits, the prosumers have to compromise their creativity and imagination in critic writing by conforming to the rules set by Open Rice and Popular culture in town. The extent of freedom to express and style in presenting the restaurant reviews, if one takes a closer study, is largely controlled by Open Rice and influenced by public voting via an easy "click" at finger tips, thus constraining the organic and diversified growth of this emerging review culture.

While the social media corporation reaps considerable profits from various forms of advertisement and collaboration, it has to provide continuous service in maintaining the website in shape and highly efficient. To remain competitive among other similar platforms, the corporation has to generate creative initiatives for restaurants as well as users from time to time to sustain netizens' interests and expand the browsing mass. As the critical success of the website lies on high browsing rate and circulation, the corporation needs to attract repeated visits and contribution by the users in order to sustain the vitality of the website.

For restaurant owners or operators, while they are subject to scrutiny by the general public, they are being offered a free platform for displaying the basic information of the restaurant to ensure its presence will not be entirely missed out. This is particularly valuable to those restaurants newly launched with limited budget for advertising. Moreover, saving the cost for research on the appetite and preference on restaurant, cuisine and services, Open Rice is an effective channel to get speedy responses from consumers/ customers and provides very good references for restaurant owners or Chefs in running their business or improving their dishes.

As such, rather than a one-sided exploitation on the free labour, it is more appropriate and accurate to describe the relationship between the website owner, the review writers and restaurant owners as interdependent upon which each party got their own slice of benefits and value they deem important to them, although not without compromise.

Conclusion

Open Rice provides an unprecedented platform for general public and the restaurant owners to contribute and converge into a community where they collectively create a new gourmet culture and standard for restaurants in Hong Kong. It also set up a direct channel for restaurant operators or chefs to learn the feedbacks from consumers about their tastes, requirements and preferences not only on food, but the atmosphere of the restaurant, the hygiene and service quality. By sharing updated information of restaurants and launching various initiatives including best restaurant/ dish/ chef election or competition, Open Rice has also played a key role in promoting catering industry to a new level and dimension although its excessive power in sharing of members' information to third party for marketing purposes could mean a certain degree of trespass in privacy.

Broadly speaking, Open Rice is a platform of collaboration rather than exploitation, in which the users, browsers, advertisers and the social media corporation collectively created a user-friendly and comprehensive online restaurant guide book for all. The interdependence relationship shared among the social media, prosumers and the restaurant operators contributes to the popularity and success of this open platform.

Notes

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6. David Hesmondhalgh, User-generated content, free labour and cultural industries, *Ephemera: Theory and politics in organization* 10 (3/4), 2010, p. 269
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2. Turkle, S. "Chapter 8 & 9: Always on. Growing up tethered", *Alone Together : Why we expect more from technology and less from each other* (New York , 2011), p. 151-186
3. Fuchs, Christian, Class And Exploitation on the Internet, *Digital Labour : The Internet As Playground and Factory*. Ed. Trebor Scholz (New York : Routledge, 2013), p. 211-224
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8. http://www.mpfinance.com/htm/finance/20121114/columnist/ee_ee2a2.htm

[herbert](#)

共 [1845](#) 篇食評

眼淚教我的事

2013-03-15

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吃完甜美的蘋果批,也是時候讓出座位給還在排隊的客人了. 故事到此還未完結,因為維妮還一早在另外一家店子霸好檯讓我們五人在那邊掃甜品. 對,人生實在有太多難以預計的事情,也想不到這天的散心之行會變成一連兩場的甜聚. 希望以這段歌詞,來為妹妹,也為文迪打打氣:

我能感覺 你的身體 藏了一座雪山
你不允許 傷心融化了 難堪
請你伸手感覺 我的心裡 留了一片海岸
擁抱你的眼淚 釋放內心的不安

心若澎湃 就讓他感情氾濫
我就在這讓你依賴 好過一個人承擔

誰學會笑著感嘆 誰學會假裝樂觀
誰讓你認為一定要強悍 不能哭得像小孩
誰說過人生苦短 我們有淚不輕彈
我想 大喊 學會哭才真的勇敢

我們生來 負著期盼 一聲哭了才算
怎麼到了現在 一切變得不自然
你的悲傷 不願意被誰看穿
覺得這樣就是失敗 寧願一個人心酸

誰學會笑著感嘆 誰學會假裝樂觀
誰讓你認為一定要強悍 不能哭得像小孩
誰說過人生苦短 我們有淚不輕彈
我想 大喊 這一切其實沒有那麼難

人類獨有的天賦
這樣的禮物證明了我們有情感 聽來不算太壞
誰學會笑著感嘆 誰學會假裝樂觀
誰讓你認為一定要強悍 不能哭得像小孩

誰說過人生苦短 我們有淚不輕彈
我想 大喊 釋放壓抑的情感

我陪你走過難關 接受偶爾很悲觀
我們的生命必須有一些遺憾 雨後天不一定藍
正因為人生苦短 累就停下喘一喘
跟我 大喊 哭出來才是真的勇敢

推介美食: Baked Apple Tart with House Made Vanilla Ice Cream,Chocolat Chaud,Poached Eggs & Ham

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