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On the marketing language of hospitality

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Biography: Richard Tresidder is a Senior Lecturer at Sheffield Business School, Sheffield Hallam University. Richard holds a doctorate in Social Semiotics and a Masters Degree in Social Anthropology. He has published widely in the area of the semiotics of tourism and hospitality and jointly authored Marketing in Food, Hospitality, Tourism and Events in 2012.

Abstract— This paper explores how the language of hospitality is shaped in contemporary marketing communications. It traces an established global semiotic language of hospitality, and how a set of images and textual conventions have come to define both the hospitality industry and the hospitality experience in contemporary marketing practices. The ability to recognize and to understand the theoretical foundations of this language when utilized alongside traditional marketing creates a more holistic form of marketing practice. This paper puts forward the proposition that marketing is fundamentally a cultural activity that requires an in-depth understanding of its social and cultural foundations. It is only once this has been achieved that we can create effective and customized marketing campaigns that generate relevant meaning for the consumer.

Keywords-component: semiotics, methodology, sign vehicle, hospitality, dining, food, marketing, interpretation, websites.

0. Introduction

One of the crucial elements of effective hospitality marketing is that the marketing message provides a transparent communication about the nature of the product, and the benefits that the consumption of the product bestows upon the consumer. However, in order to reach this stage, marketers and academics need to understand precisely what messages should be communicated, and how the consumer understands and locates meaning in hospitality communications. This necessitates both the adoption of traditional approaches to the analysis of markets through segmentation, and the augmentation of such approaches with a more culturally orientated methodology. This enables the identification and exploration of the significance of the product or activity for the consumer. It may be argued that the Hospitality experience plays a significant role in contemporary life and is often employed to commemorate the passage of time, life, death and

celebration. As a result our own individual relationship to hospitality as consumers is imbued with social, cultural, historical and individual biographical significance. This brocade of influences informs a discourse or language of hospitality that permeates contemporary hospitality marketing. This paper explores this language and identifies how the industry generates meaning and how as consumers we interact with this discourse by adopting a social semiotic model (see Figure 1).

To illustrate how the language of hospitality has become fundamental to effective contemporary hospitality marketing practices three hospitality websites are explored: Raymond Blanc's Two Michelin Star Hotel and Restaurant 'Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons' (<http://www.manoir.com>), Thomas Keller's 'The French Laundry' (<http://frenchlaundry.com>) and Danny Mayer's 'Gramercy Tavern' (<http://www.gramercytavern.com>). Traditional marketing approaches have adopted a largely quantitatively orientated approach to market segmentation, where the consumer is identified as part of a homogenous mass (Tresidder 2013). However, in accepting and recognizing a more culturally orientated approach, we need to acknowledge that each individual consumer will bring with him a personal biography of knowledge and experiences. This biography directly influences the way consumers interact with marketing communications, and as such each individual will find different meanings when negotiating hospitality marketing communications. In order to comprehend the impact of a personal biography on the interpretation process, this paper utilizes a hermeneutically informed social semiotic methodology that has been influenced by the work of Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2001). In this approach consumers are identified as interactive participants in the communication process, and in the interpretation process they negotiate and interact with the text in the process of meaning generation. Thus, consumers play a dynamic role in the marketing process rather than being passive, unquestioning participants in the communication process.

The methodology presented below was originally developed to analyze how potential tourists interpreted and found meaning in tourism brochures (Tresidder 2010). By adapting the conceptual framework to reflect the social and cultural significance of hospitality it has become feasible to effectively modify it for the hospitality sector. The method consists of three layers of meaning and analysis (see Figure 1). The external layer of the model identifies how consumers are influenced by the historical and cultural embedding of the hospitality experience in society, and how this establishes a language of hospitality through elements of shared understanding, or as Emmanuel (1997) labels them, 'consensus constructs'. The second level explores how meaning is both produced and consumed, and recognizes that this process is informed by a historically and culturally significant discourse that surrounds hospitality, and ultimately informs the interaction each consumer has with the text and the subsequent experience of hospitality for the individual consumer. The third level embodies the interpretation and identification of meaning by the consumer. The analysis of these layers will be explored throughout the remainder of this paper.

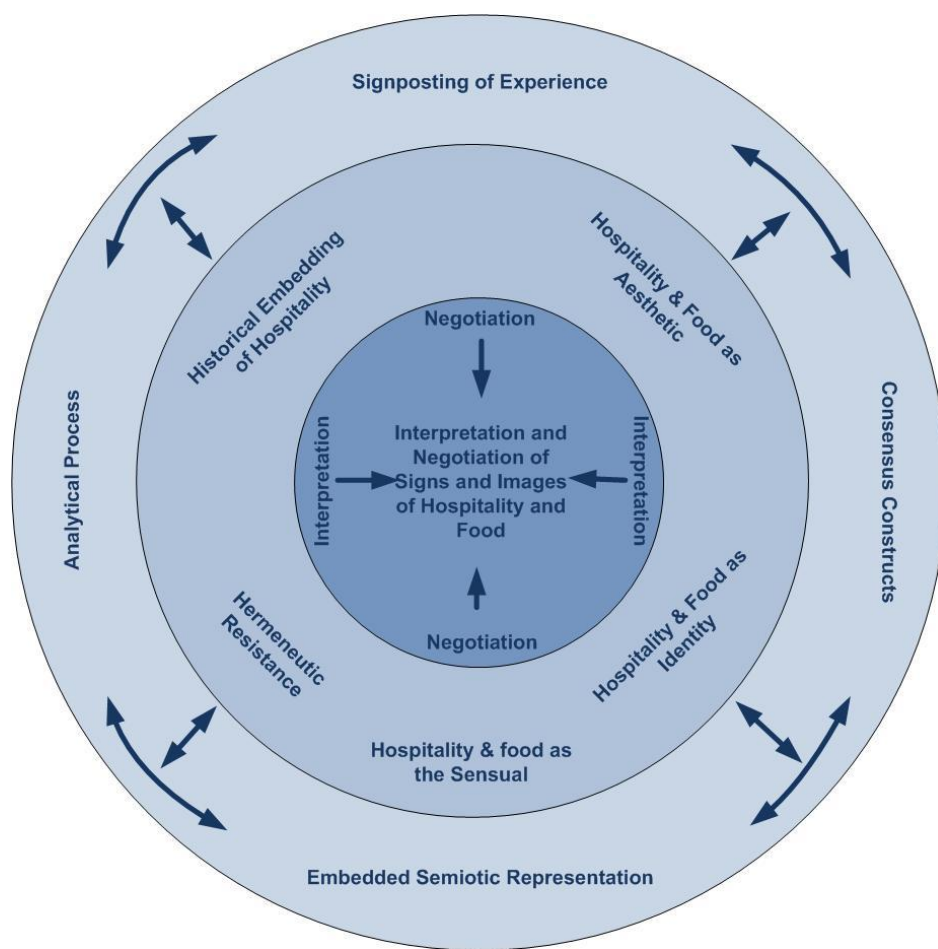


Figure 1. [Conceptual framework for mapping the social and cultural significance of hospitality.](#)

1.0 Reading the Hospitality Experience

As stated previously, this paper utilizes a social semiotic method that was formerly developed for understanding how consumers read tourism brochures. Although the conceptual framework needs to reflect the subject area, the foundation of how consumers read texts remains the same. It is to this element that we now turn.

The signs and images used in the sites can be separated into two components, the 'Narrative' and the 'Conceptual' (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996: 56). Narrative structures always have a line of communication that directs the consumer to the message being presented in the communication, or in the case of this paper the website. Conversely, conceptual representations do not rely on vectors to transmit meaning as the 'conceptual' facet belongs to the culture in which they are generated, for example the significance of hospitality in the culture with which the reader is associated or in which he is immersed. Vectors are established by routes or lines of vision across the screen or text. These vectors connect and link the text to the author. As a consequence of this process, an image can be both a participant and a vector (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996: 59). A vector affords a connection or a 'method of realization' between the consumer and the text or narrative. Once this connection is made, the initial interpretation is achieved. The vector guides the consumer and emphasizes the importance

of the representation: the "...means of realization produce quite similar semantic relations" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001: 44). Thus, the affiliation between the website and the consumer is supported and reinforced. This relationship allows the communication of meaning to be identified and espoused by the consumer in terms of collective hegemonic definitions of hospitality. Nevertheless, not all visual or textual elements on the website support universal forms of interpretation that cross cultural and social divides:

Rather, a given culture has a range of general, possible relations which is not tied to expression in any particular semiotic code... This distribution of realization possibilities across the semiotic codes is itself determined historically and socially. (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001: 44)

Therefore, the representations of the experience of hospitality in the three websites (and all hospitality orientated marketing) are mediated by historical and cultural discourses (see Artbury 2005, O'Connor 2005, O'Gorman 2007) that are continually contextualized by a rich in meaning semiotic language of hospitality. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996: 45), this mediation challenges notions of reality:

Pictorial structures do not simply reproduce the structure of reality. On the contrary, they produce images of reality which are bound up with the interests of the social institutions in which the pictures are produced, circulated and read. They are ideological.

Therefore, from a sociosemiotic point of view, restaurant websites can be seen to have an objective and a purpose that is ideological (Ferguson 1998) as it represents a number of commercial or corporate discourses, for example the many discussions that surround the relationship between McDonalds and globalization, westernization or health.

The process into which consumers (actors) enter when reading restaurants' websites renders them reactors, while the goals of the websites become phenomena (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001: 64). The reactor is the participant who enacts the looking or gazing, while the phenomenon is shaped by alternative participants at whom the reactor is looking, or by a whole visual proposition. Therefore, the images become the actor as they are non-transactional, while representing a phenomenon of hospitality by virtue of their location in The French Laundry or the Gramercy Tavern's websites. While the web banners linking to information about the Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons' and the Orient Express Group become a reactor, a transactional response is devised by the reader as the 'text directs perception' and interpretation through reinforcing 'signposts' of experience. In this process, the written textual element of the website guides perception and underlines the significance of the images used, which results in a conversion activity that is guided by techniques such as the use of text (Davis 2005), changes in written context and the represented meaning of the hospitality experience (Marshall 2005). Kress and van Leeuwen (2001: 67) call this process 'participant relay'. This is clearly witnessed in The French Laundry's website with elements of the philosophy directing the interpretation process. For

example, the picture of a dressed scallop is accompanied by text that supports the experience by stating

"Because a great meal is not one that fills you up. A great meal is a kind of journey that returns you to sources of pleasure you may have forgotten..."

This relay demonstrates a text-image association in which the text extends or re-conceptualizes the visual information about the nature of the experience that is offered by the restaurants.

The interpretation of narrative images on the website is additionally directed by the presence of what Kress and van Leeuwen (1996: 67) define as 'secondary participants'. These



Vegetable Garden French Laundry



Vegetable Garden Le Manoir

Figure 2: Serving the Organic

participants are not related via vectors but become linked in other contexts (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001: 71) in the 'setting' of the narrative images. For example, if an image of a customer is contained in an advertisement, it creates a vector that defines other images' role and status in the service context, while waiting staff in the background emphasize the nature of the relationship between the host and guest and status of the guest in the context of the service relationship as they are demonstrating their subservience (sic). Another example of this process are the glass cloches that protect the vegetables from the weather as seen in Le Manoir's garden (see Figure 2), or the statement on the Gramercy homepage : "...bricks for the wood burning oven come from the last American foundry to cut bricks by hand." Both of these examples represent a relationship to the authentic and offer a contrast to the fast food culture (Delind 2006) and the inauthenticity of postmodern culture. In a way such semiotic examples of authenticity offer a form of roots in a rootless

society, or alternatively a semiotic refuge for the consumer to enter, and to psychologically escape the profane aspects of everyday life.

The first stage of consumers' interpretation places the experience of hospitality [in](#) the numerous cultural and historical discourses that define hospitality and food. These discourses are supported by narrative and conceptual structures utilized [in](#) the websites. The recognition of these structures both locates and signposts [the](#) experience of The French Laundry, Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons' and The Gramercy Tavern [in](#) contemporary cultural definitions of food and hospitality. [The](#) embedding of significance and the use of distinct hospitality orientated signs and images are contextualized [in](#) this movement. The websites intersperse and distort conceptions of place, country, the archaic, the contemporary and the commercial, [while obfuscating](#) the [websites'](#) commercial marketing [with](#) an individualistic space.

The use of hegemonic representations [of](#) hospitality [in](#) marketing texts creates what Jenkins (2003) calls 'expected places'. [These](#) places reflect the ordering of images by providing representations of all the aspects of hospitality we would expect to see, for example the dining room, food, décor etc., or in other words the foundations of the language of hospitality. These are supported in the case of the three restaurants by a variety of experiential themes, such as the statements pertaining to the provenance of the bricks, or the garden at Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons'. [These](#) experiential themes add an additional layer of experience to the practice of hospitality and mark their difference. The use of these experiential themes signposts what these restaurants stand for, thus cementing their position, status and reinforcing the myth of haute cuisine. [These](#) conventions in hospitality marketing [perpetuate](#) definitions of luxury and hospitality and create [needs](#), [wants](#) or [desires](#) on the part of consumers. This theme is developed in all [three](#) sites. [The](#) Gramercy Tavern utilizes a tradition and heritage that is represented through the décor and statements about the provenance of the bricks and the antique American furniture. The French Laundry provides a more organic or 'earthy' approach, the initial picture of the door that is painted in a heritage blue, [surrounded](#) by mellow bricks and ivy, [signifying](#) an understated notion of home. [This](#) feeling is further reinforced by the continual link to seasons and products. Therefore, time as represented [in](#) the websites unifies the past, present and future into a temporal [continuum of social and cultural disorder](#) that is expressed by Jameson (1991: [67](#)) as, '...a series of pure and unrelated presents in time'. Although the language of hospitality [in](#) marketing communications offers countless escape [routes](#) in which the consumer can find significance and escape, the experience of hospitality becomes '...dominated by a consciousness which emphasizes the discontinuity of experience' (Harvey 1993: [157](#)). Nevertheless, the representations of the restaurants and communicated experiences of hospitality delineate [a](#) hospitality space in which experience may be semiotically consumed in the form of a tangible ontological act.

2.0 Constructing the Language of Hospitality

In order to understand the significance of the language of tourism developed and utilized in the restaurant websites, it is important to understand the meaning of the [employed](#) language, and how it is constructed. [The](#) following sections explore the significance of this semiotic language. The marketing of 'Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons', 'The French Laundry' and the 'Gramercy Tavern' provide

access for the consumer to a sensual world of luxury and hedonism in which food and the experience of dining are elevated from the mundane to a multi-sensual experience in which food, landscape and philosophy merge as one. Hospitality marketing utilizes what Dawkins (2009: 34) labels '...the semiotics of the senses'. The marketing of experience differs from other sectors, such as fashion marketing, as the selling experiences are not tangible acts. We cannot test drive or try the experience on as we can only feel or consume it once. The experience will differ every time we re-visit it, as is the case with experiences whereby marketers endeavor to immerse consumers in a sensual world of luxury and indulgence.



Figure 3: Le Manoir Bedroom

As a result, the language of hospitality adopts a very sensual and visceral focus and consequently the relationship between hospitality marketing and the senses is of particular significance.

Sutton (2010: 217), while exploring the complexity of the senses goes further by introducing the concept of synesthesia which represents the idea that senses do not operate in isolation, but rather form a union of senses. This concept is particularly important for defining and comprehending the experience contained in the three restaurant websites, and how it differs from mundane dining experiences. Sutton stresses that

Synesthesia ...blurs the objectivity and passivity of western sensory models by showing the ways that sensory experience is not simply passively registered but actively created between people. Synesthesia is a reminder of why food and the senses should be considered together.

This view of the senses has been explored recently in tourism studies and it is interesting to note that Pan & Ryan (2009) identify the multisensory nature of tourism and its significance to the contemporary tourist. The senses have always been an important part of tourism and hospitality and we can even chart this back to Baudelaire's (1863) notion of the flâneur and the awareness of exploring the city through the heightening of sensual awareness of the environment. According to Biehl-Missal (2012: 5)

we need to consider the impact [that](#) senses have on our understanding of the world and how it influences our behavior; we gather "...aesthetic experiences through our five senses"; we "create an embodied, tacit knowing that...can influence behavior". However, as [Pan & Ryan \(2009\)](#) [found in](#) their New Zealand research, although tourists utilized all of their senses, taste was privileged as the most significant sense experience in all of the [explored](#) sites .

Since the publication of John Urry's 'The Tourist Gaze' in 1990, tourism research has been overly reliant on the notion of the gaze, and in particular the ocular. It is only once [one](#) starts to explore organizations such as The French Laundry that [it becomes evident](#) that sight plays a very small part in the overall gustatory experience. This theme is also reflected [in](#) an increasing number of academic articles that are challenging the primacy of the gaze by identifying the significance of other senses [in](#) the realm of tourism and hospitality as [encountered](#) in marketing texts. This exploration of the senses [is](#) particularly reflected in gastronomic tourism. [According to Lopez-Guzman & Sanchez-Canizares \(2012: 63\)](#) [the](#) exploration of the senses through the consumption of food is one of the major motivations for [engaging](#) in gastronomic tourism. This association between food, wine and sensory experiences (see Getz 2000) is lucidly summed up by Sutton ([2010: 215](#)), who, [while](#) commenting on the significance of the relationship between food and the senses states that

...food is central to cosmologies, worldviews, and ways of life' and is reflected in the term 'gustemology' is a means of understanding the spectrum of cultural issues that exist around taste and the sensory aspects of food.

Intrinsically, the experience offered at these restaurants is a journey that [grounds the individual metaphysically in the marketing text \(see Brownlie et al. 2005\)](#) through the [stimulation](#) of [the](#) senses and [by](#) linking food to [a](#) physical, social and cultural geography, [while](#) [guiding](#) the sensual expectations of the customer. In short, hospitality marketing materials often provide a semiotic aestheticized link to the beginning of time. By semiotically challenging and stimulating the senses, the semiotics of hospitality marketing provides a rupture [with](#) or break from the everyday; it creates a purity of experience and a re-establishment of an awareness of the senses that have been dulled by the act of 'being' in a world dominated by catastrophe, homogenization and technology. As Levi-Strauss affirms in assessing the significance of [the](#) senses:

The senses...are operators, which make it possible to convey the isomorphic character of all binary systems of contracts connected with the senses, and therefore to express, as a totality, a set of equivalences connecting life and death, vegetable foods and cannibalism, putrefaction and imputrescibility, softness and hardness, silence and noise'.

([Saussure 1983: 1](#) 53, quoted in Sutton 2010: [2](#)10)

Thus, for Levi-Strauss, senses are codes that transmit messages and the "Gustatory Code" (1983: 164) is privileged over other sensory codes. [But most important](#) for this article is the idea that links the

codes that surround the food system to the "social system" in which we live (Sutton 2010: 210). This view is supported by Weismantel (2005: 97), who ascertains that sensory aspects of taste change '...the social and economic structures that make consumption possible...'. Therefore, although the production of 'sensespaces' in tourism provide us with place and space to explore the sensual side of life, we cannot remove or isolate them from social and economic structures.

2.1 The language of Hospitality

The marketing of restaurants draws on semiotic codes that concern both hospitality and food (see Brunori 2007). These codes also include the formal ritual of food production and service (see Figures 2-5) to create an identifiable experience and theatrical delivery and presentation of food that elevates the experience of dining at luxury restaurants to that of the extraordinary. Concomitantly, establishments such as Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons', Gramercy Tavern and The French Laundry represent the iconic (see Claseen 2007) or mythical (see Magee 2007) sectors of hospitality, against which other restaurants will be benchmarked. The mythical discourse that surrounds hospitality is informed by the theme of hospitality, providing physical and psychological peace, security, comfort and refreshment (Hely 2002). In other words the myth that surrounds these restaurants and their representations in hospitality marketing provide a refuge from the world of fast food and ambiguity of living in a post-industrial world (Delind 2006). The semiotic language of hospitality (see Figures 2-5) offers consumers a world of prodigality and luxury, a world of experience in which the average consumer is generally excluded. The images used by the websites are empty, with no sign of human interaction; the site invites us as consumers (or even voyeurs) to vicariously find escape or even social therapy through the semiotic consumption (rather than physical consumption) of the represented experience of hospitality.

Meaning is guided or signposted by a set of visual and textual marketing conventions that we invest with exchanges of cultural capital and expressions of identity. In this manner our relationship with hospitality acts as a marker of who we are (Howes 2004, Delind 2006, Ruben 2008, Dawkins 2009) or who we wish to be. It is interesting to note that Thomas Keller reflects this sentiment in The French Laundry homepage by stating that "Respect for food is a respect for life, for who we are and what we do"

Additionally, we are invited to elevate the consumption of food to a sensual and luxurious exercise (Reed-Danahay 1996, van der Veen 2003, Howes 2004, Magee 2007, Dawkins 2009). The language of hospitality is an ideological construct (Ferguson 1998, Ruben 2008) that is disseminated through the portrayals of hospitality and food in culture (Ferguson 1998, Hollander 1999, Ferry 2003, Magee 2007) and advertising. It is from these ideological influences and embedded definitions of hospitality that it draws its content, structure and message.



Gramercy Tavern



The French Laundry



Le Manoir

Figure 4: Dining Experiences

2.2 Hospitality as a Sacred Journey

The language of hospitality marketing also offers a notion of time and space that may be conceptualised as 'servicescape' (Chronis et. Al. 2012: 265). Hospitality marketing continually utilises the differentiation between time and space as a convention in marketing practice. This manipulation of time and space can be seen to operate on a number of levels, whether in terms of offering empty spaces in which consumers can find joy or pleasure, or of a refuge of authenticity in an inauthentic world. However, what links all of these conventions is that the representations and messages embedded in marketing texts provide a representation of hospitality as not being ordinary, as not being part of everyday life. The extraordinary nature of the three restaurants and their 'servicescapes' examined in this paper represent a time and place that is so removed from everyday lived experience that the configuration of the hospitality experience may be defined as sacred.

Although the relationship between hospitality, food, the sacred and religion is clearly developed (Hely 2002, Artbury 2005, O'Connor 2005, O'Gorman 2007, Claseen 2007), the communication of the hospitality experience in the three restaurant websites institutes a 'configuration of time, space' (Jokinen and McKie 1997: 23) that locates hospitality and food as the sacred and as the antithesis of the profane aspects of everyday lived experience (Sered 1988). The idea that

hospitality can be part of a sacred journey or even a cultural pilgrimage is clearly reflected in the [philosophy](#) of The French Laundry's website :

A great meal is a kind of journey that returns you to the sources of pleasure you may have forgotten and takes you to places you haven't been before.

The language of hospitality marketing draws on various images, phrases, conventions, debates and discourses, words and images to create the representation of a world in which food and hospitality legitimately become part of what Reed-Danahay (1996) refers to as the 'legitimate art of living', the extraordinary and even the sacred when considered as the opposite of everyday lived experience. The conception of the hospitality experience as linked with the notion of the sacred and the differentiation [between](#) time and space as represented in hospitality marketing has been developed through the modification of Durkheim's (1995) hypothesis of the 'sacred and profane'. [Consumers'](#) exploration of [the](#) websites of these three restaurants is just one of the means [whereby](#) consumers locate and fix their encounters with the social. Just as Silverstone (1988) envisaged television as a 'ritual frame', as a cerebral, creative and practical space, in which everyone can access the things that mark off the social from the private (Couldry 2001: [158](#)), the website fashions a ritual frame that is semiotically constructed, representing the ritual character of hospitality. [One](#) of the major conventions used to express this ritual frame [is](#) graphically illustrated by the ritualistic setting of the tables (see Figure 4). This ritual formality demonstrates a type of experience and way of life, it informs behavior, perception and cements the significance of the activity.

Just as the language of hospitality is a product of the social, so are contemporary definitions of what constitutes the sacred. Durkheim (1995) in his exploration of religion as a social phenomenon recognised that the notions of the sacred and [the](#) profane are socially engendered and reflect the particular nature of the society and culture in which [they have been](#) generated. [Thus](#), the sacred emphasizes the distinction between social and ordinary experiences. In opposition to this, Caillois (1988: [20](#)) recognised that the two mutually exclusive domains of the sacred and [the](#) profane do not mingle in unmediated ways, that is, in the absence of collectively recognised rites of passage and acknowledged risks of admixture. 'He took great care to outline how the profane needs the sacred, and the regulation, through rites, of the process of consecration in the passage into the sacred from the profane.' (Genosko 2003: [75](#)). In adapting these foundational works [in](#) the context of consumer behaviour and marketing, Belk et al (1989), recognised that consumers enact a sacred/profane distinction [in](#) common domains of experience, and consumption becomes '...a vehicle of transcendent experience' (1989: [2](#)). This is significant for understanding the nature of the language of hospitality marketing in providing individual consumers with access to a world in which escape and fulfilment [are](#) possible. This notion of hospitality [as viewed from the standpoint](#) of the sacred is inextricably linked with the concept that marketing texts generate semiotic forms of stimulation. Berlyn (1977: [170](#)) [contends](#) that humans attempt to sustain a [certain](#) intensity of arousal and seek 'artificial sources of stimulation...to make up for the



Gramercy Tavern



French Laundry



Le Manoir

Figure 5: Food as Art

shortcomings of their environment'. The experience of hospitality and dining is elevated into this atmosphere of transcendental arousal through ritual and significance (Fantasia 1995, Ferry 2003, Marshall 2005). The language of hospitality that underpins contemporary hospitality marketing signifies, connotes and directs interpretation while reinforcing the significance of the ritualistic element involved in the production and consumption of the hospitality experience. The ritual of dining generates a form [of](#) social harmony (Givon and Trostler 2008) and even social therapy; it acts as a script that regulates [the](#) order of dishes, the formality of [the](#) setting and [the](#) intensity of experience (Marshall 2005). The websites offer the interactive participant a 'passage to the sacred' or the 'sacred sphere of excess' (Caillois 1988: [282](#)). The embedded connotations of luxury in the restaurant websites express a social distinction that augments social bonds. [In these sites](#) the hospitality experience and dining turn out to be a celebration of society itself (van der Veen 2003), and in the Durkheimian tradition 'sacred'.

3.0 Conclusion

Hospitality marketing provides an interesting case of how meaning is constructed and consumed in marketing communications. From the research [at hand](#) it [emerged](#) clearly that subjects such as tourism and hospitality generate strong feelings as they play such an important role in our lives. In addition to this we need to recognize the cultural and social significance of such activities, and acknowledge that our understanding [of](#) the hospitality experience has been shaped by a complex

mixture of historical, social and cultural influences that embed the experience of hospitality in the contemporary world. It [may](#) also be argued that the marketing of tourism and hospitality need to be treated as a specialist area of activity that locates and identifies the significance of the activity and its importance for the individual consumer. As stated previously, although traditional approaches to hospitality marketing adopt a largely quantitative approach to understanding the sector, the adoption of a more culturally orientated approach will enable marketers to comprehend the most effective means of communicating the hospitality experience. [As a result](#), marketers [will be capable of utilizing](#) an effective semiotic language that truly reflects the meaning of contemporary hospitality.

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