

Consumption of Globalized Food Among Isan Women in Bangkok: Globalization Vs Localization¹

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Abstract

This article discusses a study of the consumption pattern of Western fast food among women from Isan who are working and living in Bangkok. The study investigated the extent to which Isan women incorporate the consumption of Western food into their own lives, and the extent to which this is done by the process of cultural heterogenization versus cultural homogenization. The case study informants came from various provinces in the northeastern region of Thailand. They were followed to their homes where their eating and consumption patterns were studied, and a general set of knowledge about their lives was acquired. Their consumption patterns in Bangkok were also studied and the data was connected to their consumption of fast food and was analyzed to draw some conclusions regarding their eating habits within a heterogenization-homogenization framework.

¹ This article is based on the author's PhD dissertation entitled "Consumption of "Globalized Food" Among Isan Women in Bangkok."

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Introduction

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates at the same time.³

Food lies at the very heart of human existence. It defines us. Eating is intertwined with all our other human activities; it is difficult (or perhaps even impossible) to think clearly when you are ravenous. On a daily basis, people are subjected to the demands of their stomachs.

Consumption is at the core of our society, and what ties individuals to society today are their activities as consumers as their lives are organized around consumption.⁴ One way or another, consumerism affects the life of all, enticing people to surround themselves with all kinds of goods that become indispensable as markers of urban ways.⁵

Lately, the increase in research and focus on popular culture has led to an increase in the amount of writings on the topic of consumption. It is a concept which is associated with high speed and high quantity, whether in industry, fashion, modernity or good taste, which can be seen in the changes in food culture in various countries.⁶

Each item consumed is surrounded by its own system of production, distribution, marketing, procurement, and finally, consumption. Each of these systems is, in turn, constituted by its own multifaceted and segmental economies in an increasingly globalised capitalism.⁷ Beng Huat discusses, as an example, the manufacturing of clothes, describing how each garment is not merely from one location, but may be dispersed across various sites around the world: An American clothing company may buy cotton from Africa, transform

³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

⁴ Baumann, 168 quoted in Beng Huat, *Consumption in Asia*, 3.

⁵ Mulder, *Mysticism and Everyday Life in Contemporary Java*.

⁶ Sunate, *Historical Development of Consumerism in Thai Society*.

⁷ Beng Huat, *Consumption in Asia*, 4.

it into fabric in Switzerland, design the garment in New York, and cut and sew it in one of the increasing number of locations in Asia. The finished garment is then re-exported and distributed to its global market locations, including relatively affluent Asian ones. We can extend the discussion regarding globalized capitalism to the matter of food consumption; we may start asking ourselves what is indeed local and what is indeed foreign cuisine, and where do we draw the line between the two.

In this article, I will investigate, through two case studies, the extent to which women from the northeastern region of Thailand,⁸ living and working in Bangkok, interpret the consumption experience of globalized food and localize it into their own lifestyle and culture.

Most research conducted on the consumption of Western fast food has focused mainly on middle class consumers. This article, however, will highlight the consumption of Western fast food by lower class consumers in Thai society by studying the consumption pattern of two case studies. The case study informants are two Isan women from the lower class, Lek and Kai, who both work and live in Bangkok.

While the middle class might be influenced by 'excessive consumerism,' the lower classes have their own interpretation of the consumer society in which they live. Furthermore, by focusing on women, a crucial understanding of how everyday life is organized and experienced by the female gender can be developed. By focusing primarily on women from the northeastern region of Thailand, studying the extent to which they interpret the Western fast food experience might provide us with a deeper understanding of how this takes place.

The northeastern region of Thailand is the poorest region in the country, and those moving down to Bangkok often have to settle for jobs that pay minimum wage. This means that the women might not have the resources to consume as much Western fast food as the higher classes, yet they are just as entitled to purchase these products as anyone else.

⁸ This particular region is often referred to as Isan, and both terms will be used interchangeably in this article.

In this article, I will present and analyze the data concerning the lives and the consumption pattern of Lek and Kai. The research was conducted by in-depth interviews and participant observation regarding the informants' lifestyle in the Isan region and in Bangkok.

Public Eating

Until about 40 years ago, the choice of restaurants in Bangkok included a few luxurious Chinese restaurants and three hotel restaurants serving Western food.⁹ The Chinese food culture came into play when the Chinese immigrated to Thailand during a period of societal reconstruction, bringing their own customs and traditions along with them. Chinese cuisine came to be favored by the Siam Royal Kitchen during the reign of King Rama III, and His Majesty fed Chinese food to monks during Chinese New Year.¹⁰ Small restaurants selling Chinese dishes could also be found, but it was not until after WWII that an increasing number of restaurants opened in Bangkok. In that period, Chinese restaurants were popular, and you could often find Chinese noodle shops and Thai curry shops selling food side by side. Their clientele, often dubbed the 'plastic bag housewives,' would get prepared items from these stalls to take home from work and serve it with rice, which they themselves would prepare at home.

Van Esterik found that the trend for purchasing prepared food initially began in the post-WWII period and has continued to grow since then as women have entered the workforce to a greater extent than before.¹¹ In fact, Yasmeen found that Thailand has the highest female labour force participation rate in Southeast Asia and that women form the majority of the employees in food processing and food services.¹² Below is a table showing average weekly expenditures for prepared food eaten away from the home. As can be seen, the majority of breakfast and lunch meals are consumed away from home, while dinner is still usually eaten at home.

⁹ Van Esterik, "From Marco Polo to McDonald's", 177-193.

¹⁰ Sunate, *Historical Development of Consumerism in Thai Society*.

¹¹ Van Esterik, "From Marco Polo to McDonald's".

¹² Yasmeen, *Bangkok's Foodscape*, 71.

Table 1: Average Weekly Expenditures
for Prepared Food Eaten Away from Home, Greater Bangkok, 1990

Expense Category	Expenditure	% of total
Breakfast	41.97	16.2
Lunch	163.04	63
Dinner	34.56	13.4
Snacks	3.01	1.16
Alcoholic Drinks	14.81	5.73
Other Food and Beverage	1.3	0.5
Total	258.69	100

Source: National Statistics Office, Office of the Prime Minister, Report of the 1990 Socio-Economic Survey: Bangkok Metropolis, Nonthaburi, Pathum Thani, and Samut Prakan, 1994:17

The restaurant culture has changed dramatically since the new Thai middle class emerged as a result of the rapid economic growth in East and Southeast Asia over the last few decades. Now there are expensive restaurants and other forms of conspicuous consumption, which helps contribute to the construction of an elite identity.¹³ Western fast food restaurants, such as KFC and McDonald's, first put their mark on Thailand in 1982 and 1983, respectively. Following this, the number of Western fast food restaurants opening branches in Thailand has soared.

Globalization of Food

Much debate has surrounded the role of large American corporations such as McDonald's and KFC in developing countries. This discussion usually relates to the influence of these American corporations and their globalizing processes on local cultures, and an extensive amount of research has been conducted on the topic of American fast food since the 1990s. Globalization refers to the process by which the experiences of everyday life, marked by the diffusion

¹³ Walker, *Food Consumption Survey*.

of commodities and ideas, are becoming standardized around the world. The global food trade is certainly not a new phenomenon. Mintz says that transportation of food across boundaries has occurred over hundreds of years and is certainly not a phenomenon people have just recently been accustomed to.¹⁴ The Thai food system, much in unison with Thai culture, is described in terms of Indian and Chinese influences. Curries and noodles are described with minimal attention paid to the indigenous and unique Thai taste.¹⁵ As Van Esterik elaborates, Thais have always been very inclusive of all things foreign, and evidence of indigenous cuisine can be spotted as far back as 1298 when Marco Polo was in Yunnan near Nanchao. After the Thai occupation of Angkor Wat (1431), Khmer cooks came to work in Ayutthaya. We assume that these cooks introduced Indian curries and desserts to the Ayutthaya court, and today, Indian desserts such as boiled red and white sweets are found today as part of the royal style system of food for rituals, such as weddings.¹⁶

As can be understood, even prior to the introduction of McDonald's and KFC in Thailand, the country was already being influenced by foreign forces and had accepted the process by localizing the habits into their own, known culture. Therefore, the idea that globalization is merely a "wave which hits developing countries" seems unlikely. The Marxist tradition, which sees mass consumption as the instrument of capital, transformed working individuals into consumers in order to further its own interest of capital accumulation.¹⁷ According to this belief, global influences lead to a homogenization of local cultures, but do not consider the impact the local culture has on external forces. Anti-globalites claim that cultural imperialism is being manifested through the spread of McDonald's and other fast food chains,¹⁸ and that local cuisine is under threat by the appearance of this fast food chain.

¹⁴ Mintz, "Food Culture and Energy".

¹⁵ Van Esterik, "From Marco Polo to McDonald's".

¹⁶ Van Esterik, "Royal Style in Village Context".

¹⁷ Beng Huat, *Consumption in Asia*.

¹⁸ Cultural imperialism can be defined as "the use of political and economic power to exalt and spread the values and habits of a foreign culture at the expense of a native culture." Tomlinson, "Cultural Globalization and Cultural Imperialism", 170-190.

Heterogenization, which is the opposite of homogenization, does consider how local consumers use mass-produced items in their own manner and hence the products are given meaning through their active incorporation in people's lives.¹⁹ Therefore, to investigate the extent to which the women interpret the consumption experience and localize it into their own culture, we first need to mention some of the literature that has been written on the topic of Western fast food and globalization.

McDonald's as the Focus of Fast Food Research

The majority of the research conducted on the topic of Western fast food has focused on McDonald's, and several books and articles have been written about McDonald's and the McDonaldization of society.²⁰ The golden arches are a powerful food related symbol which can be recognized worldwide by adults and children alike. So it is of no surprise that researchers take such an interest in McDonald's. Beng Huat's paper, "Singaporeans ingesting McDonald's," was written as a chapter in his book titled *Consumption in Asia: Lifestyles and Identities*. Beng Huat focuses first and foremost on the youth in Singapore and how they relate to and incorporate the experience of McDonald's in their everyday lives.²¹ Beng Huat draws the conclusion that "whereas all imported products may be potentially imprinted with the cultures of their respective origin, the consumption of the products is not automatically tantamount to the consumption of the cultures of the origins themselves." As an example, he mentions how Singaporean teenagers use McDonald's to suit their own needs and that the notion of 'American-ness' did not figure into the results given by the teenagers at all. The teenagers stated that they did not care for the food, but that they went there to meet up with friends and because of the close proximity to their homes.

¹⁹ Jackson, "Towards a Cultural Politics of Consumption".

²⁰ Coined by Ritzer and defined as 'the process by which the principles of fast food restaurants are coming to dominate more and more sectors of society, on a local and on an international level.' Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*.

²¹ Beng Huat, *Consumption in Asia*.

In contrast to how costumers at McDonald's are encouraged to queue, customers at the new McDonald's in France reportedly:

...gathered all along the counter, with little respect for the cash registers as line markers. Consequently, the workers at the counter, for whom it was presumably their first active day on the job, spent a good deal of effort trying to herd customers over to their particular cash register 'station.'²²

While Singaporean teenagers are used to queuing, they use the space at McDonald's as a meeting place and as a place to do their homework. This is in sharp contrast with the policy in the US where minimizing the chances of its outlets turning into teenage hangouts is very important. Beng Huat concludes that, with reference to Singapore, the 'American-ness' of McDonald's has lost its visibility and that McDonald's has become a local enterprise and is being interpreted as such.

Gerke contributed to the book by writing a paper on the Indonesian middle class called "Global Lifestyles and Under Local Conditions: the New Indonesian Middle Class."²³ Here, Gerke touches on a subject which might be considered relevant to Thai society, namely 'symbolic consumption and lifestyling.' According to Bourdieu, the role of cultural differentiation in the delineation of social positions is a process by which a class-determined habitus distinguishes itself in the cultural market place by identifying with a clearly defined set of products and activities.²⁴

Even before the economic crisis in 1997, only a minor portion of the Indonesian middle class had the funds to participate in the Western or urbanized lifestyle. The majority of the middle class population was not able to afford these items, thus they engaged in substitutional activities to give their lives a 'middle class touch.' As their consumption abilities were limited, consumption assumed a merely symbolic dimension.²⁵ He then lists examples of people sitting

²² Fantasia 1995: 222 quoted in Beng-Huat, *Consumption in Asia*.

²³ Gerke, "Global Lifestyles Under Local Conditions", 137-157.

²⁴ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 191.

²⁵ Gerke, "Global Lifestyles Under Local Conditions", 146.

in locations where they can be easily seen, such as at a McDonald's outlet, with a hamburger and milkshake in hand. People would share brand name sweaters with their friends and borrow jewelry from their roommates. Through such acts of symbolic consumption,²⁶ groups of society try to demonstrate membership in other groups and might end up ignoring their own reality.

Watson argued in his book, *Golden Arches East*, that McDonald's has largely separated itself from its American roots and has become a local institution for generations of consumers in various Asian countries,²⁷ which is in line with what Beng Huat argued two years later. Watson argued that McDonald's has become a local institution in these respective countries largely because of the manner in which it has been absorbed and assimilated, such that it is no longer thought of as a foreign restaurant and in some ways no longer functions as one.²⁸ The hamburger is, in many Asian countries, no longer considered a foreign import as the people consider it something familiar and normal. Bak, who also contributed to *Golden Arches East*, found that even though McDonald's did not enter the Korean market until 1988, and had to negotiate its way through discourses about the national and the global, it is today thriving in South Korea,²⁹ so much so that its restaurants are considered important landmarks in the capital city of Seoul. Bak notes:

...while it may be hard to convince young South Korean children that McDonald's is not part of their 'indigenous food culture,' the particular process of indigenization in this case has meant that the ways that McDonald's is familiar in South Korea were never predetermined and reflect the fact that the outcomes of globalization processes are always, without a doubt, spatially variable.³⁰

²⁶ Also referred to as lifestyling by Gerke, signifying a superficial activity with no real consumption deriving from economic well-being.

²⁷ Watson, *Golden Arches East*.

²⁸ Kristof, *Big Macs to Go*.

²⁹ Bak, "McDonald's in Soul: Food Choices, Identity and Nationalism".

³⁰ Bak, "McDonald's in Soul: Food Choices, Identity and Nationalism".

Watson places great emphasis on McDonald's as being 'a big treat' for low-income people, and in 1994, a dinner at McDonald's for a Chinese family of three normally would cost one-sixth of a worker's monthly salary.³¹ Watson claims that the price is not the reason why the Chinese frequent McDonald's, and it is common for families to cut back on expenses in other areas to be able to afford a meal at McDonald's. A 'trade area study' conducted by the management of Beijing McDonald's found that, by 1993, a whopping 38.3 per cent of the population frequented McDonald's four times a month or more. Watson explained this by stating that the younger generation, who have the funds to visit McDonald's on more than one occasion, and who are the people who visit McDonald's and other fast food outlets, such as KFC, most frequently, wish to be "connected the outside world, and eating at these venues has become an integral part of their daily lives." It is a way for them to take part on the transnational cultural system.

Watson's findings show that McDonald's has caused small, but influential changes in Asian dietary patterns; while at the same time consumers have transformed their local McDonald's branch into local institutions. While 'fast food' in the United States may imply that it is to be consumed rapidly, this might not be the case everywhere, and people use the concept and space of McDonald's in a manner which suits them the best.

Consumption of Globalized Food: Case Studies of Two Isan Women

Lek

Family Background: Lek is a 38-year-old single female from the district of Prang Ku in the province of Sisaket, the oldest of three siblings. She has two younger brothers who are both single and live with their parents in Prang Ku. Growing up, Lek's parents supported her and her siblings by working in the rice fields near their home. On occasion, they would have to sell all the rice they had harvested

³¹ Watson, *Golden Arches East*.

without being able to keep some for themselves and their children to eat. Lek had to assist her parents from an early age and was responsible for preparing all the meals from the age of six. She also worked in the rice fields both before and after school and had to care for her brothers while her parents were working. Lek was forced to quit school after 6th grade to help support her parents. She is currently working as a live-in maid in Bangkok, making approximately 15,000 baht per month. She has to send home to her parents no less than 75% of her earnings, leaving her with very little to spend on food and other items for herself.

Consumption pattern: Lek was brought up on Khmer cuisine, which includes eating jasmine rice at every meal. The cuisine is closer to Thai food than Isan food,³² and coconut milk is a common ingredient. While Khmer cuisine bears many similarities to Thai cuisine, the main difference between Khmer cuisine and Thai cuisine is that the former manages to create full flavor without the use of chili,³³ and what would perhaps be considered the hallmark of Khmer cuisine is *prahok*.³⁴ Lek, however, acquired a taste for the spicier Isan cuisine when she moved to Bangkok and was introduced to it by her then boyfriend. The Isan cuisine has several elements in common with Lao cuisine, where the staple food is steamed sticky rice. The food of Isan is famous for being extremely spicy and pungent, seasoned with fresh herbs and fermented fish. Today, Lek's daily diet consists mainly of Isan cuisine. After recently seeing her boss having bread and cheese for breakfast, Lek herself has gotten a taste for these items. She has replaced her daily bowl of breakfast rice with a small baguette with butter and cheese and a cup of hot coffee. She cannot afford the costly imported cheese, so has therefore found a cheaper alternative in pre-sliced, individually wrapped cheese. Lek claims that this cheese tastes just as good as what her boss eats. Despite having found a cheaper alternative, her breakfast meal is still her most costly meal of the day. For lunch and dinner she buys Isan style food from street carts around her workplace. Lek takes pride in her cooking and she is often asked to

³² Thai food has a smooth and lasting taste with a touch of sweetness.

³³ Khmer cuisine was established before the introduction of chili.

³⁴ A fermented paste with strong odor and intense flavor made from small fish called *trey riel*.

make Western food for the family she works for, although she is never allowed to eat it.

On Lek's days off, she prefers to visit Isan style cafes with her friends, food courts, KFC or pizza venues, depending on how much she is able to spend. Lek claims to be extremely fond of pizza and she often visits Pizza Company with friends at the beginning of the month when she has just been given her salary.³⁵ When asked to list three reasons why she is so fond of pizza, she immediately replies: it is fast, it is delicious, and it keeps me full for a long time. For Lek, the visit to a Western style restaurant is all about the food; she says that while her friends are chatting, she is just eating until there is nothing left. She says that she also likes the chicken at KFC, but prefers pizza because of the taste of the dough and cheese. Despite saying that it is all about the food, she does mention that she would never visit a fast food restaurant alone. Lek has a monthly food budget of 3,000 Baht, and if she exceeds that, she says that she can eat low-cost sardines with rice for a relatively long period of time, as long as she can enjoy a meal or two at Pizza Company during the month.

As Lek is rarely able to afford a visit to a pizza restaurant, she often visits food courts with her friends. There she buys 'spicy spaghetti,' which she claims is more like Thai food than Western food. She can sit for hours at a food court with a magazine. The employees leave their customers alone, who can sit undisturbed for as long as they would like without ordering much of anything.

Kai

Family Background: Kai is a 41-year-old single female from the district of Kra-Sang in the province of Buriram. Kai is the oldest of four children. She grew up with two younger sisters and one younger brother. Growing up, they did not have much food and were often forced to make a meal out of very little. For instance, Kai's parents would feed all four children with four bowls of rice and two eggs. The

³⁵ Pizza Company is an affordable restaurant chain based in Bangkok with focus on pizza and Italian-American cuisine.

majority of the people in Buriram eat a Khmer style diet, and because they purchase most food from the local market, the food served in Kai's parents' house does not change dramatically from season to season.

While Kai is single with no children of her own, she is the aunt of seven. While two of Kai's siblings are still living in Kra-Sang, Kai moved down to Bangkok with one of her sisters after having completed the equivalent of ninth grade.

She is currently working as a live-in maid for a British man in Bangkok and claims to make a decent living. She is the sole financial supporter of her parents as her siblings cannot afford to assist their parents.

Consumption pattern: Similar to Lek, Kai was brought up eating a Khmer style diet. When Kai first moved to Bangkok, her late boss would take her out to restaurants and teach her how to eat different dishes and how to order. Prior to moving to the capital, Kai did not know how to use cutlery or how to drink coffee, and says that it was her late boss who taught her all of those things. Initially, on her arrival in the capital, Kai was eager to visit all the various fast food restaurants. Today, however, she prefers restaurants that are perhaps perceived as 'more exclusive' and where you do not have to queue to order your food. However, she has recently discovered that she allergic to the MSG restaurants tend to add to their food, making her more likely to cook food at home. Kai says:

I really like the steaks at Santa Fe.³⁶ Unfortunately my body cannot tolerate the excessive amounts of MSG added to the steaks, so I prefer to cook steaks at home now. I usually buy the steaks from Villa Market.³⁷ Their steaks are very tasty. I do not mind paying a little extra for high quality steaks, although I only eat steak on very special occasions and sometimes on the weekends if I have just gotten my paycheck or if I have good friends coming to visit. I like treating my friends to good, homemade meals. My friends might bring some food from outside, such as papaya salad and sticky rice, to eat with the steaks.

³⁶ An American chain restaurant found throughout Bangkok serving steaks at a reasonable price.

³⁷ One of Bangkok's up-scale supermarkets.

Kai says that although she likes the taste of the food, she only pays a visit to places like McDonald's and KFC these days when her nieces and nephews are visiting from Buriram. Her family is used to eating fried chicken, which is a food that is always on the table in Buriram. It is a reasonably priced, high protein food that the children love. So a visit to KFC where they can enjoy a familiar food in a new setting is a 'must' when Kai's nieces and nephews come for a visit. However, because of the high prices, Kai will often keep the wrapping from KFC and put her own homemade fried chicken and french fries in it, and then present it to the children.

Kai is very fond of imported coffee and talks extensively about her love for coffee and cheese. While Kai might be considered overweight by Thai standards, she says that "happiness is responsible for her womanly figure." She often sips on sugary drinks and nibbles on a variety of pastry goods, filled with pandan leaves and shredded coconut.³⁸ On a day-to-day basis in Bangkok, Kai tends to purchase her own food from local street carts, while preparing food, often Western dishes, for her boss at the house. Because she is financially responsible for her parents and often has to give money to her siblings as well, she does not spend as much money on food as she would like, but says that she cherishes the moments when she is able to eat a home-cooked, Western meal. By drinking imported coffee every morning and throughout the day, she gets her small "dose of luxury" without exceeding her budget.

Discussion

In this article, I have shown how women from the northeastern region of Thailand who are living in working in Bangkok, interpret the consumption experience of Western fast food in their own manner and localize the experience into their own culture.

The informants mentioned that they only consume Western fast food on special occasions. While Lek will visit Pizza Company when

³⁸ Pandan leaves are used in Southeast Asian cooking to add a distinct aroma to various dishes, particularly desserts.

she has just received her salary, Kai will mainly make these visits when she has family staying with her or when going out with friends. Having to save up for a visit makes the anticipation of the visit even greater. In addition, Lek mentioned that she will eat lower-cost food towards the end of the month just to afford the pizza, which shows that they cherish and place great importance on the visit. Western fast food is certainly not considered a cheap alternative compared to other local food, which is how it often is considered in the US. In Bangkok, locals linger and spend time at the respective venue, either with family or friends.

This completely contradicts how fast food is designed to be consumed in the US. In Watson's study on consumption of fast food in Hong Kong, he found that the average eating time for most Hong Kong customers was between 20 and 25 minutes, compared to 11 minutes in the United States, and that was in the business district of Hong Kong.³⁹ Even if fast food restaurants are jammed with customers, the staff let people linger. In Seoul, the average sitting time was 35 minutes, where women averaged a longer sitting time than men.

The Isan women also tend to share the food, placing each dish in the middle, turning the visit into a social event. They clearly do not merely passively consume the food, but savor the experience, making it something special to remember. The majority of the women from Isan who are living and working in Bangkok were not exposed to Western food from birth, but learnt about the dishes when they first moved to the central region after having finished school.

Researchers say that dishes that carry an essence of familiarity are likely to be preferred to dishes one is less familiar with. In addition, many do not consider a hamburger a meal, while the chicken at KFC is more substantial. Similar to the results found in Bak's study on McDonald's in Korea, children growing up with McDonald's are convinced that hamburger consumption is an indigenous food experience.⁴⁰ Most families in Isan, however, are more familiar with fried chicken, which includes both the manner in which it is to be

³⁹ Watson, *Golden Arches East*.

⁴⁰ Bak, "McDonald's in Soul: Food Choices, Identity and Nationalism".

consumed, as well as the taste of it. There is no cutlery and no specific knowledge regarding table manners are required. In addition, one can sit at a Western fast food outlet for extended periods of time without being bothered by the staff, creating the perfect space to relax and enjoy a light meal. Therefore, they are not just passive consumers who eat what is available, but they choose items based on previous experience and familiarity. Similar to that of Singapore, KFC and McDonald's are establishments which can be found throughout Bangkok, in every block on almost every corner. This creates a feeling of normality and a sense that these fast food chains are just like any other outlet.

The food is adapted to suit the tastes of the locals, while at the same time keeping their original meal ideas. For instance, here in Thailand, McDonald's have rice dishes for sale, including rice soup for breakfast. KFC has mango and sticky rice ice-cream, as well as spicier chicken options. The outlets market themselves into the local culture, perhaps taking out the "American-ness" of the experience and inserting "Thai-ness." This is further confirmed if we look towards advertisements in the media which demonstrate the limitations of globalization. Rather than just rolling out the same advertisement in every country, both KFC and McDonald's have to adapt their advertisements to suit the different cultures. So paradoxically, globalization itself has required companies to adopt a variety of localizing strategies in order to succeed commercially.⁴¹

The findings support the idea that the local women interpret the consumption experience in their own manner and localize it into their own culture. They are not just passive consumers. They treat the experience as something 'out of the ordinary,' and they focus on the venue as a social space where they have created their own use of the space, both in terms of symbolic and actual value. The case study informants consume items from these venues in the only manner they are able to: through infrequent consumption. Both the ordering process of Western fast food and the way it is consumed does not require any acquired skills and is simplified by the presentation of colorful menus with large price tags. The case study informants are not faced with

⁴¹ Jackson, *Local Consumption Cultures in a Globalizing World*.

any elements they are not familiar with and they are able to enjoy the luxury of a clean, bright space surrounded by the middle-class. Lek, who looks forward to eating Western fast food as soon as she receives her salary, manages her money around her consumption of Western fast food. Kai, on the other hand, only frequents these venues when her nieces and nephews are visiting from Buriram, and uses the “excitement factor” of KFC for her family as a reason for the visit. The women consume Western fast food in a different manner to how it is consumed in its country of origin. They treat it as something special, something they only afford once in a while, and as a place where they want to linger with friends and family members.

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