WHEN HAWKER BRANDS EXPAND: IMPACT AND IMPLICATIONS OF COMMODIFICATION

(OR: HOW ARE BIG BRANDS COMMODIFYING HAWKER CUISINE IN SINGAPORE?)

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mass-market brands in the business of selling traditional hawker dishes in Singapore's hawker centres, coffeeshops, and food courts are on the rise. These brands often adapt traditional dishes and/or cooking methods for increased efficiency and cost savings, among other reasons. As a business expands, there is pressure toward commodification, such as through the adoption of time- and cost-saving strategies for mass production that can also be adopted by smaller players. In an economic sense, these adaptations are a positive phenomenon, and such outcomes are in fact pursued and promoted by various government initiatives targeted at raising productivity (NEA, n.d.)[1]. However, it is also easy to see that the mass-production of food can easily lead to a loss of authenticity, arising from factors like outsourcing, standardisation, and cost-saving innovations.

This paper provides a general overview of the hawker scene in Singapore and studies the issues raised above through the lens of commodification, looking specifically at what happens when hawker brands expand. How do local hawker businesses — including individual hawkers, hawker stall chains, or food court/coffeeshop operators — respond to the pressure toward commodification of their offerings?

2. OVERVIEW OF THE HAWKER FOOD SCENE IN SINGAPORE

2.1. It Starts in Hawker Centres

Most dictionary definitions of "hawker" capture an element of itinerancy — by definition, it must be possible to readily move a hawker and their entire business

[1] The Hawkers' Productivity Grant (HPG) provides funding to support hawker stallholders' purchase of "automation equipment and digital services solutions" such as e-ordering and kitchen management systems, but also including items like automatic stirrers, mixers, fruit/vegetable peeling machines, and automatic noodle makers. Up to 80% of equipment costs can be reimbursed to eligible hawkers under the HPG. Hawkers' Productivity Grant, NEA website https://www.nea.gov.sg/our-services/hawker-management/programmes-and-grants/hawkers-productivity-grant

enterprise from place to place, even if they are in practice not so moved. By such definitions, food and drinks sold by true itinerant “hawkers” are on the decline in Singapore. The only remaining examples in Singapore today are illegal hawkers (one quixotic seller of roasted chestnuts was caught 19 times in four years (Lay, 2023)) and licensed ice cream and canned drink sellers who operate out of mobile carts — with only a small minority who are not limited to operating in the towns where they reside, as the newer licence-holders are restricted by their individual town councils (MSE, 2016).

Thus, one must look beyond the dictionaries to be able to understand what it means to be a hawker in Singapore. Street hawkers were relocated to the more permanent setting of purpose-built hawker centres by 1986, bringing an end to the period in Singapore’s early years where street hawking was “rife”, attracting hygiene, regulatory, and other concerns (MSE, 2016).

Today, who is a “hawker” in Singapore? The simplest answer is those who run the stalls in any of the 118 hawker centres (as of Nov 2023) in Singapore. On its “Hawkers Online” website, the National Environment Agency (NEA) uses the term “hawker” to refer to those who operate stalls in hawker centres. A “Guide for Hawkers” on the site provides step-by-step instructions for those seeking to be a stallholder at Singapore markets and hawker centres (NEA, n.d.). Indeed, these hawker centres are the focal point of Singapore’s successful campaign for the inscription of hawker culture on UNESCO’s Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The government has prioritised hawker centres as the site of policy moves aimed at preserving and influencing the culture surrounding hawker food. For example, hawkers and hawker assistants in hawker centres must be Singapore Citizens or Permanent Residents, with exceptions made only for foreign spouses of hawkers. This, according to the Ministry of Sustainability and the

Environment, is “to safeguard and preserve the local identity of our hawker culture” (Fu, 2023).

Another aspect of hawker culture the government is keen to preserve is keeping them open to diners from Singapore’s various cultures. When Singapore’s hawker culture was inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List in 2020, the inscription did not focus on the particular cuisines or cultures involved in hawker food, and looked broadly on “community dining and culinary practices in a multicultural urban context” as a whole (UNESCO, n.d.). It is also worth noting that the idea of multicultural community dining is a relatively recent phenomenon in Singapore’s two-century history. Anthropologist Dr Lai Ah Eng notes that prior to the creation of hawker centres, “early kopitiams and food stalls assumed a strong ethnic dimension in their spatial distribution and cuisine”. (Lai, 2015, p. 106) This had to do with the fact that these food businesses’ target clientele were migrant workers seeking familiar tastes of home. Therefore, prior to the era of hawker resettlement, the food on offer in each of Singapore’s distinct ethnic enclaves would likely have reflected the area’s population demographics. However, things did not stay that way with multiculturalism and ethnic integration being affirmed and established as one of the pillars of independent Singapore through various policies over the years (Ang & Stratton, 2018).

“Original” hawkers recognised through subsidised rental rates

One reason for hawker centres being the focal point of government policy around hawker culture over the years is that they house many of the hawkers who had sold their fare on the streets — the hawkers who were part of the original tradition of street hawking that had fed segments of Singapore’s population since the 1800s, and which predate the hawker centre resettlement. One example is Bukit Merah View Carrot Cake, which has reportedly been in business since the 1950s (Kay, 2022). Concessionary rental rates were initially extended to the original hawkers who were relocated from the streets and alleyways into hawker centres, and also to hawkers offered stalls under the now-discontinued Hardship Scheme (Tan, 2015)[2].

Some of those stalls' owners continue to pay those subsidised rates — either S$192, S$320, or S$384 every month (depending on the scope of upgrading works carried out at the respective hawker centres where they are located). The subsidised rates are offered at a significant discount compared to the market rates that owners of non-subsidised stalls pay, which can be as high as S$6,810 — the winning bid for unit number #01-50 at Newton Food Centre in a tender exercise held in August 2023 (Lay, 2023). That said, while hawkers not paying subsidised rents bid for their stalls, this means the market rate can be as low as S$1 (Fan, 2021). The rates are then adjusted to prevailing market rates assessed by independent professional valuers at the point of renewal of the tenancy, which is typically for a three-year period (NEA, 2021). Overall, the median rent for non-subsidised hawker centre stalls has apparently stabilised in recent years to "around S$1,250" per month (Kwa, 2023).

However, the practice of subsidising rent is on the decline. As of September 2023, there were an estimated 6,000 cooked food stalls in 114 government-owned hawker centres, and about 30 per cent of the stalls were on the subsidised rental scheme (Fu, 2023), down from around 53 per cent in March 2013 (Balakrishnan, 2013). The number continues to fall over time as more of the pioneer hawkers retire, making way for new entrants. Subsidised stallholders who manage to appoint a successor can assign their stalls to another person who will enjoy the subsidised rates initially, before rental rates are raised over the course of a three-year tenancy period (NEA, 2020). This scheme is intended to help subsidised stallholders by allowing them to exit the industry easily.

[2] Those aged 40 years and above, whose family income fell under a stipulated threshold, and who had dependents to support could rent hawker stalls at subsidised rates.

2.2. But Hawker Food Isn't Confined Strictly To Hawker Centres

While hawker centres are the natural starting point for understanding the hawker scene in Singapore, hawkers, hawker food, and even "hawker culture" also exist outside of hawker centres, in food courts, coffeeshops, and other kinds of food establishments. One can run a hawker food business simply by virtue of having set up a stall in a hawker centre, but I suggest that any definition of a "hawker" (with respect to a specific individual or business) should take into consideration the following non-exhaustive factors:

1. **Degree of association with the itinerant vendors who plied their trade on the streets of Singapore prior to the resettlements of the 1980s:** For example, the various outlets advertising "The Cheapest Michelin-starred Meal In The World" started from a single stall in a hawker centre — Liao Fan Soya Sauce Chicken Rice & Noodle in Chinatown Complex Food Centre. Provided that the business still has its founder Chan Hon Meng (also known as Hawker Chan) at the helm, it might perhaps still be considered a hawker business notwithstanding its considerable expansion.
2. **Whether they offer items associated with Singapore's original hawkers:** We look to "hawker food" and "hawker dishes" as reflections of Singapore's history and culture, and thus a hawker or business offering food items sold by Singapore's original hawkers, such as satay, wanton mee, bak chor mee, could be considered hawker food.
3. **The setting in which the individual or business operates:** Besides those who operate in hawker centres, individuals or businesses may be regarded as "hawkers" if they operate in a casual setting with relatively affordable pricing. The element of relativity is important as the food items offered may be of absolute quality and quantity that command high prices, but which may still be considered affordable when measured against other

> settings where similar food is offered — take for example, the tonkatsu chain Maruhachi, which has eight outlets offering “restaurant quality” dishes like deep-fried Japanese pork cutlets and Japanese curry at prices from S$9.80. The outlets are located in coffeeshops and food courts (Maruhachi, n.d.).

There will of course still be cases where it is harder to judge whether a business is still a “hawker business”. For example, Ya Kun Kaya Toast started as a coffee stall in 1936 before moving to Telok Ayer Market (now known as Lau Pa Sat) in 1972, then to the Telok Ayer Transit Market in 1984, and then to Far East Square in 1998, the base from which its meteoric expansion began (Lee, 2021). Ya Kun no longer operates out of hawker centres and coffeeshops, opting instead to cater to its customers in the air-conditioned comforts of shopping malls and standalone outlets. However, it continues to offer the same fare (kaya toast with eggs and Nanyang kopi) that its founder Loi Ah Kun sold in the 1940s, along with trendier seasonal products. It would be a stretch to call the owners of the multinational franchise “hawkers”, but much less of a stretch to cite their traditional eggs, toast, and coffee offering as an example of “hawker food”.

Nonetheless, any assessment of the hawker scene would be unnecessarily limited if it only considered what goes on in hawker centres. After all, many successful hawker businesses with decades of history now operate in a variety of locations and settings.

Connections between coffeeshops and hawker centres

What happens in one setting affects the other. One of the initiatives introduced to moderate the price of cooked food sold in coffeeshops is to build more hawker centres. This was so that the coffeeshop stalls would have more competition, and thus a greater incentive to keep prices affordable. Speaking in Parliament in

November 2018, then Minister for the Environment and Water Resources Masagos Zulkifli explained:

"We were concerned about the lack of affordable dining-out options for Singaporeans at a time when there was a boom in coffeeshops and food courts. Natural market forces were pushing up rents at those private Food and Beverage (F&B) outlets, and consequently food prices. The public was concerned about the rising cost of living. In response to widespread appeals by Singaporeans, we resumed building hawker centres to serve as a ballast to stabilise cooked food prices against the emerging dominance of coffeeshops and food courts." (Masagos, 2018)

This view, that increasing the availability of hawker centre food is one way to increase competition for coffeeshops and food courts, treats the food in all three settings as being substitutable to some degree. There is thus no reason to confine one's definition of a "hawker business" or "hawker food" to what goes on in hawker centres. Especially when viewed from a diner's point of view, one can often purchase similar items at similar price points across all three settings, with some variation to be expected depending on the exact location and other differentiating factors unique to each stall.

However, in practice, there are differences between the settings. For example, hawker businesses in government hawker centres are subject to different operating conditions than those who operate elsewhere. For example, in terms of their eligibility to hire foreign workers, as mentioned above, hawker stalls in hawker centres must be operated by Singapore Citizens or Permanent Residents, and with the exception of operators' foreign spouses, non-residents are not allowed to work as hawker assistants in hawker centres. Outside of hawker centres, the prevailing sector-wide foreign manpower restrictions do apply, but operators of food establishments such as restaurants, coffeeshops, and food courts can apply to hire foreign workers, subject to a maximum of 35% of their total workforce, under a tiered levy system where employers with a higher percentage of foreign workers pay higher levies (MOM, n.d.). The work pass applications are also ultimately subject to approval by the authorities.

Budget meal policy

The concept of a "budget meal" appears to have originated in NTUC Foodfare coffeeshop in Clementi Block 420A, in 2013 (Pang, 2013). The meals, offered at a discount to the regular fare, were priced between $1.80 and $4, and made available at each stall in the coffeeshop. By 2016, NTUC Foodfare had expanded this initiative to all of its "HDB coffeeshops" (i.e. the coffeeshops rented from HDB) and its food court at Admiralty, offering meals priced between $1.80 and $3. "This is to ensure that all Singaporeans, including the budget-conscious, can have access to affordable food in their neighbourhood," said NTUC Enterprise in a 2016 media release (NTUC Enterprise, 2016). Earlier in 2015, Ci Yuan Hawker Centre opened as the first SEHC, and offered budget meals too — priced at $2.80 (Ong, 2015). Other SEHCs did likewise, and the provision of a budget meal option by SEHC hawker stalls came to be a norm (Koh, 2023).

Budget meals have also come to be provided in other settings. Since 2018, the operators of coffeeshops rented from HDB were incentivised to provide budget meals at "around S$3" per meal, MND also explained in 2022 (MND, 2022). The incentive came in the form of having budget meal availability as one of the factors to be considered in evaluating tenders. Under the new arrangement, tenders would not be awarded to operators solely based on price, but also based on how the operator scored for "Quality", which includes whether the operator would provide budget meals.

The policy encouraging the provision of budget meals in these coffeeshops as a desirable practice has since been ramped up to a mandate, making it a non-negotiable. From May 2023, all HDB rental coffeeshops due for renewal have been required to provide four budget meals and two budget drinks as a condition for the renewal of their three-year tenancy (HDB, 2023). Coffeeshops already providing budget meals will be required to provide six budget dishes. Compliant coffeeshops then receive a rental discount of 5% for the first year of the renewed tenancy (BudgetMealGoWhere, n.d.). With this, all coffeeshops rented from HDB will have budget meal options by 2026. Furthermore, while the requirement does not currently apply to those owned and managed by private operators, HDB is studying regulatory options to require budget meals to be provided in privately owned eating houses, Senior Minister of State for National Development Sim Ann said recently in Parliament (Htet, 2023).

In this regard, there is some convergence between the policy governing hawker businesses in different settings, regardless of whether they are operating in public hawker centres or coffeeshops.

2.3. The Affordability Conundrum

The new policy on budget meals highlights a key challenge currently faced by hawker food businesses — pressure to keep food affordable amid concerns over the rising cost of living in Singapore, while balancing that with the need for hawkers to make a decent living even while business costs are also rising (NEA, 2020). As Singapore food critic and restaurateur KF Seetoh pointed out in 2012, requiring hawkers to provide cheap meals ought to be accompanied by help to bring down the cost of rental, raw ingredients, and other fees.

NEA outlined some of the other measures taken to moderate hawker stall rents in a 2020 statement responding to a forum letter in a local newspaper. The measures include disallowing subletting and assignment of hawker stalls, and removing reserve rent since March 2012. NEA also provides information to potential bidders, such as a list of successful tender bids for the past 12 months, along with “extraordinarily high past bids which did not lead to positive outcomes" — this information is provided to help "prevent over-bidding" by potential bidders (NEA, 2020).

3. SO, IS HAWKER FOOD BECOMING COMMODIFIED IN SINGAPORE?

The paper has thus far covered an overview of the hawker scene in Singapore and the current operating pressures faced by those in the hawker business. The present section examines how these pressures relate to the risk of hawker food becoming commodified, starting with a chosen definition of commodification, followed by a description of the process of commodification, and a brief overview of the possible effects. The paper then examines some examples of commodification in the hawker scene. The possible impact of commodification on authenticity is also discussed in a separate sub-section.

3.1. What is Commodification?

This paper adopts Christoph Hermann's definition of commodification as "a process in which market value comes to dominate use value" (Hermann, 2021, p. 20).

According to Hermann's theory of commodification, some of the potential consequences of commodification include:

1. The exclusion of potential users (such as those who are not able to pay the price for the commodified good or service);
2. Focus on the needs which promise high profits at the cost of catering to less lucrative needs;
3. Focus on short-term profitability over long-term sustainability;
4. Standardisation and homogenisation of output;
5. Bureaucratisation; and
6. Sacrificing quality for profitability, among other effects

To explain these effects, Hermann builds on existing definitions of use value ("the usefulness of the product, i.e., its ability to satisfy human needs") and market value (where a good or service receives a price and is sold on a market). In his definition, Hermann suggests that commodification is not a state of affairs, but rather a process in which there is a "critical point" when market value comes to dominate use value — a dynamic perspective, rather than a static view. Hermann's definition of commodification thus approaches the issue primarily from the perspective of the producer/provider of goods and services.

It should also be noted that Hermann does not conceive of commodification as reducible to a "general formula" — that is to say, there is no single feature or characteristic that conclusively distinguishes a "commodified" good or service from one that is not. Rather, "each case needs to be analysed separately".

One important distinction of Hermann's conceptualisation is how it differs from others who have looked at things like "markets, money, competition, and the profit motive" as markers of commodification. Instead, he suggests that these are not indicators as much as they are "instruments for subjugating use value to market value". To this, he points out that other instruments can also be applied to similar effect — for example, the adoption and pursuit of performance measurements over other non-measurable outcomes could also have the result of subjugating use value. Following in this vein, it is important to avoid treating "commodification" as interchangeable with a number of related, yet distinct concepts — "capitalism", "commercialisation", and "marketisation", to name a few. Indeed, a nuanced explanation of commodification as a process is especially necessary for analysis of the present topic. This is because hawker cuisine in itself can be considered as an already-commodified form of provision for daily meals; operating a hawker business involves the sale and purchase of food, and food, more broadly, has become commodified through the industrial food system in modern times (Vivero-Pol, 2017).

As Vivero-Pol writes:

> “the industrial food system continues treating food as a commodity and not as a sustainer of life, being its value no longer based on its many dimensions that bring us security and health, but on the tradable features that can be valued and priced in the market. Value and price are thus mixed up, superseding non-economic dimensions, such as being the essential fuel for the human body or its relevance for individuals’ and societies’ culture.” (Vivero-Pol, 2017, p. 442)

In Singapore, we can quantify the increase in demand for food cooked outside the home, which the Singapore Department of Statistics (DOS) classifies as “Food Serving Services” (including meals bought from restaurants, hawker centres, food courts, and so on). This is done using quinquennial (every five years) data from DOS.

Table 1: Average monthly household expenditure among resident households by type of goods and services (1993 to 2018)

Year	**1993**	**1998**	**2003**	**2008**	**2013**	**2018**
Total Expenditure	3033.4	3627.6	3797.8	4432.7	5771.3	5904.5
Food Expenditure	800.4	858.6	797.9	949	1188.3	1198.9
- % of Total Expenditure	26.39%	23.67%	21.01%	21.41%	20.59%	20.30%
Food And Non-alcoholic Beverages	396.8	376.9	332.2	357.1	423.8	388.7
- % of Total Expenditure	13.08%	10.39%	8.75%	8.06%	7.34%	6.58%
- % of Food Expenditure	49.58%	43.90%	41.63%	37.63%	35.66%	32.42%
Food Serving Services	403.6	481.7	465.6	591.8	764.4	810.2
- % of Total Expenditure	13.31%	13.28%	12.26%	13.35%	13.24%	13.72%
- % of Food Expenditure	50.42%	56.10%	58.35%	62.36%	64.33%	67.58%

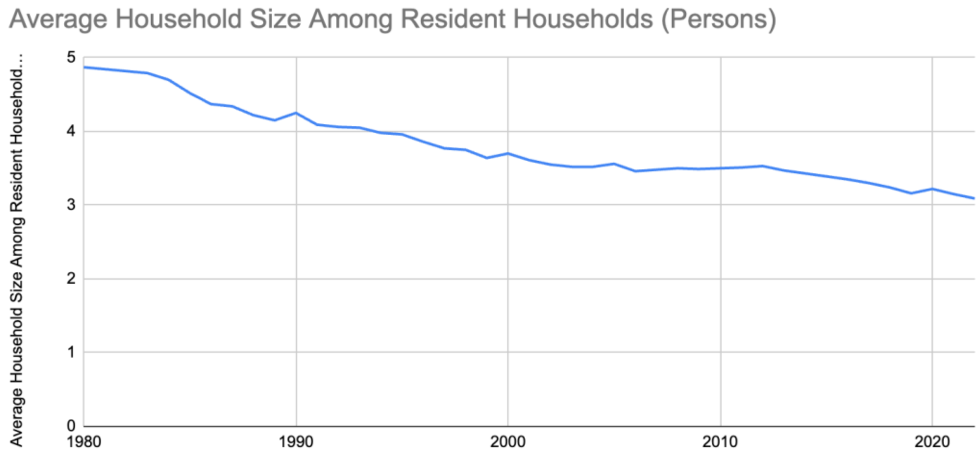
Source: Source: Average Monthly Household Expenditure Among Resident Households by Type Of Goods And Services, Quinquennial, from Singapore Department of Statistics.

Publicly-available data since 1993 shows that households are spending less on Food Expenditure as a proportion of Total Expenditure, with average household Food Expenditure falling from 26.39% of Total Expenditure in 1993 to 20.30% in 2018. However, the proportion of Food Expenditure that goes toward Food Serving Services has increased from 50.42% in 1993 to 67.58% in 2018, rising steadily in each quinquennial period. In other words, since 1993, households have been spending less on food as a whole, but a larger percentage of their food expenditure is going toward meals cooked outside the home.

This increasing reliance on purchasing cooked food for daily meals is arguably also attributable to a decline in three-generation households, and more couples where both spouses are employed (Ho, 2021)[3], which could result in less households cooking to provide for their day-to-day food needs.

[3] Singapore's 2020 Census data showed that the proportion of married couples where both husband and wife are employed increased from 47.1 per cent in 2010 to 52.5 per cent in 2020.

Graph 1: Graph of Average household size among resident households



Source: Data from SingStat (n.d.) and Ministry of Manpower (n.d.)

So why speak of commodification when hawker meals are already commodified? Taking Hermann's definition of commodification as a **process**, it can be useful to understand how a good or service is commodified, and how it may be further commodified over time. Commodification theory can also help us understand the potential **effects** of the phenomenon. Finally, commodification theory can help us understand and identify commodification's **limits** — that is to say, if a hawker business is indeed being commodified, what, if anything, stops it from being further commodified?

3.2. What is The Process of Commodification?

With operators running food courts along with food stalls therein, coffeeshop chains and chicken rice stalls growing in number, it's clear that brands and franchises are on the rise. Commodification theory suggests that this would likely be accompanied by increasingly profit-driven behaviour, with potential impact on the quality and affordability of hawker food, as well as the sustainability of the hawker practice (in terms of the preservation of the practice of selling hawker food, and more broadly, hawker culture). This paper looks at the expansion of a business, as it is one of the main factors that can trigger commodification.

It should also be pointed out that a specific type of commodification argument was not examined in this paper. Gold summarises it as such: "The overall shape of the argument is that if a good or service is treated like a commodity by some people, then it takes on the characteristics of a commodity for everyone…" (Gold, 2019, p. 166) However, Gold also proposes a mechanism by which such commodification occurs (that is, the breakdown of a shared understanding) and suggests that the scope of this type of commodification argument is limited to cases where a shared valuation of a good or relationship is "relatively fragile" or vulnerable. Given the relatively strong shared understanding of Singapore's hawker culture as something worth preserving (even if there is no established definition of who or what makes a "hawker"), such arguments are not likely to apply in this context. Therefore, this paper does not propose to consider the question of commodification in regard to the expansion of the hawker space as a whole.

In fact, Derek Hall (2023) cautions against what he identifies as "commodification of everything" arguments, which often lack definitional clarity. Hall considers the practice of highlighting examples of commodified goods or services to illustrate "the kinds of things that can be for sale nowadays" and to point to commodification's prevalence in "everything", and he suggests that it ironically highlights the limits of commodification, rather than its extent. Thus, Hall suggests two refinements: First, that commodification can be "relentless, endless, or even infinite without applying to everything", and second, that the advancement of commodification processes may, in fact, require the decommodification of some things, and thus "should not be assumed to push in only one direction". These refinements, Hall suggests, allow us to acknowledge the expansion of commodification recently, while also inquiring into "possible limits of those dynamics" (pp. 554 to 558).

Therefore, looking at commodification in Singapore's hawker scene, this paper attempts to focus on the application of the theory by examining specific businesses, rather than seeking to examine the effects of commodification on the entire hawker scene as a whole. It also attempts to identify the limits of commodification, i.e. the factors which inhibit the process of commodification and/or restrict its effects.

It should be noted that commodification can take place at different scales: A large operator buying over even more coffeeshops and food courts, a single stall expanding to new locations, or even a sole proprietor changing their operating model. Thus, this paper focuses on specific examples of commodification as it affects individual hawker stalls or hawker businesses (encompassing each business' branches, affiliated stalls, or franchises) as they expand. To the extent that expansion can be seen as one of many definitions of success for a business, each of these case studies could be regarded as a "successful" hawker business.

My research questions are:

How does commodification theory apply to hawker food in Singapore? What are the effects of commodification and how are they observed here?

Are there any factors which limit the commodification of hawker businesses? Is it possible to expand without increasing commodification and/or its effects?

3.3. Specific Impact of Commodification on Hawker Food in Singapore

Though the consequences of the commodification of hawker food in Singapore have not been as dire as the examples highlighted in Hermann's book[4], some effects he

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[4] One of the examples Hermann cites is private healthcare, where for-profit hospitals tend to focus on profitable interventions at the expense of less profitable treatments, leading to cases where "cutting-edge facilities treat foreign patients with unpleasant but non-critical conditions" while neglecting the needs of resident populations.

outlines can be mapped to the hawker food scene in Singapore — seemingly driven by the increase in the number and dominance of big players in the market.

Commodification of coffeeshops: From community spaces to investment properties

One example of the commodification of hawker food is the privately-owned coffeeshop business, and the phenomenon of increasing rental rates and thus increasing prices as these coffeeshops were transacted. This started when HDB coffeeshops were allowed to be sold at one point in the 1990s. This was to "encourage private sector ownership", the Ministry of National Development (MND) recently explained (MND, 2022). Following the implementation of the policy allowing coffeeshops to be bought and sold, Lai describes "an influx of capital" which sent coffeeshop prices soaring, and saw coffeeshops taking on the characteristics of property investments (Lai 2015, p. 119). Lai (2015) explained that some owners would purchase a coffeeshop property only to hold it for a few years before selling it at a profit. This trend was accompanied by increases in the prices of food sold at those coffeeshops.

Coffeeshop operator Kopitiam was, in fact, set up in 1989 for the purpose of making a S$2.01 million bid for a coffeeshop in Bishan Street 11, according to an archived copy of an article on Kopitiam's website (Kopitiam, n.d.). The Kopitiam brand grew, and by 2018 (when it was acquired by NTUC Enterprise), it operated 80 outlets including food courts, coffeeshops, and a hawker centre. The policy was eventually reversed, and HDB no longer sold coffeeshops to private operators since 1998. However, the phenomenon of buying and selling coffeeshops continues, as the 400 coffeeshops which were sold were not bought back by the government and can continue to be transacted. As of May 2023, there are 776 coffeeshops in Singapore, according to HDB and GovTech (GovTech, 2023). 374 are rented out by HDB to private operators and 402 are privately-owned.

Some of those 402 privately-owned coffeeshops have in fact been changing hands for eye-watering sums in recent years. In 2022, a Yishun coffee shop was sold for S$40m and is now a Chang Cheng Mee Wah coffeeshop — a brand under the Chang Cheng Group. Also in 2022, a coffeeshop in Tampines was sold for over S$40m — also to an established coffeeshop operator. Most recently, a coffeeshop in Serangoon reportedly changed hands for S$40.5 million in December 2023 (Ang, 2023). Economic anxieties surrounding such high value transactions inevitably arise. The new operator, having paid a significant sum to take over ownership of the premise, is likely to ask for higher rents from their tenants. Tenants, in turn, must also adjust the prices of their products accordingly. This was in fact the case for the abovementioned coffeeshop in Tampines where one hawker claimed to have been asked for S$10,000 in monthly rent, up from the previous rate of S$6,000 (Lee, 2022).

MND issued two statements in July 2022 in reply to questions about coffeeshop regulations which were raised after the news of the coffeeshop sales in Tampines and Yishun. Responding to a suggestion to directly control the rent charged to tenants, MND said this could reduce the incentive for owners to improve their coffeeshops (MND, 2022), and pointed instead to other factors that help ensure “access to affordable cooked food options”, such as keeping the space competitive by allowing “a good supply of coffeeshops in every HDB estate and town” (MND, 2022). Similar statements were made in 2015 in reply to similar concerns about similar transactions — in 2015, the coffeeshops concerned were in Bukit Batok (sold for S$31 million) and Hougang (sold for S$23.8 million in 2013), and MND pointed out that these coffeeshops were “outliers”, in terms of the prices they commanded. “If [the coffeeshop operators] overpay and need to charge above market price, they risk losing their customers and becoming insolvent,” said MND, which added that the coffeeshops in Bukit Batok and Hougang had plenty of competitors offering affordable food, including a new hawker centre in Hougang just next to the coffeeshop in question (MND, 2015).

SEHCs and template contracts

Another example of big players and commodification arises from the fact that big players are able to transplant tried-and-tested practices from existing ventures to new ones, presumably to save costs and improve profitability. One example of this in Singapore was observed in 2018 when various operators of Socially-conscious Enterprise Hawker Centres (SEHCs) were dragged into the spotlight for the wrong reasons. The SEHC operators had been appointed to operate newly-built hawker centres on a not-for-profit basis, at the recommendation of the Hawker Centre Public Consultation Panel, which was appointed in 2011 to review and make recommendations for the hawker scene (NEA, 2018) . But in August 2018, KF Seetoh called attention to certain template clauses in contracts issued by various SEHC operators (Seetoh, 2018). Seetoh highlighted clauses he considered onerous, such as those requiring stallholders to pay hefty monthly fees for early termination, up till the end of the original contract. There were also clauses requiring certain stipulated operating hours of — at minimum — 6 days a week, and 8 hours a day. Another clause spotlighted by Seetoh was one for the provision of “Food and Hygiene checks” on hawkers at Ci Yuan Hawker Centre at the rate of S$600 per month to the hawkers. Thankfully, after this practice was highlighted publicly, the centre’s operator Fei Siong issued a notice, dated 2 November 2018, saying that the fee “is not a compulsory commitment” and that “those who signed up” were “free to terminate” (Seetoh, 2018). While such clauses would likely not be considered exceptional in the context of private enterprise, to many, they seemed to be very much out of place when compared to the stated aim of helping to sustain hawker culture.

By November 2018, NEA intervened to require the standardisation of certain contract terms as part of what it called a “playbook” for SEHCs. Some of the operators’ clauses, and the playbook’s standardised versions are as follows:

Table 2: SEHC practices leading up to November 2018 vs practices as per NEA’s November 2018 “playbook”

Before (from various operators)	**As per NEA’s “playbook”**
Early termination will incur monthly charge of S$2,000 till end of contract.	No charge for early termination if one month's notice is given.
Legal fees for contract (S$267.50) charged to hawkers.	Legal fees to be absorbed by the operator.
Minimum operating hours: 6 days a week, 8 hours per day.	Minimum operating hours: 5 days a week.

Source: Seetoh, 2018, and Teh, 2018.

3.4. Is “Authenticity” at Stake?

The commodification of a good or service can affect its quality (Hermann, 2021). In the context of food, it can also cause a producer to opt for cheaper, inferior ingredients, or even substitute ingredients entirely (Vivero-Pol, 2017). Some may conclude that this impacts the authenticity of the food offered. However, literature on authenticity as it applies to food points to the concept of authenticity as being inextricably tied up with consumers’ perceptions rather than being pegged to an objective standard (Lu, Gursoy, and Lu, 2015).

Thus, I suggest that commodification theory is more useful to help us understand the impact of commodification on a given business’ product and whether it has undergone standardisation and homogenisation or sacrificed quality, rather than to address the question of whether food is authentic.

Three dimensions of authenticity: Objective, constructive, postmodern

The concept of authenticity, as it applies to food, is a complicated one. In the context of ethnic restaurants, Lu, Gursoy, and Lu (2015) find that from the point of view of a consumer, the authenticity of a dining establishment may be interpreted from any of three main dimensions (objective, constructive, postmodern) identified in the existing literature. From the first dimension, (i.e. objective), authenticity is conceived as something that can be judged by objective criteria, but for consumers, it can be difficult to distinguish “true authenticity” from “staged authenticity” — “the seemingly authentic context that has been contrived”. In contrast, the constructive conception of authenticity focuses on the consumers’ socially and personally constructed perceptions and interpretations of what they see, and suggests that authenticity is not something that can be objectively determined. Finally, the postmodernist conception of authenticity suggests that authenticity is simply valued for its ability to create “an enjoyable illusion” and that consumer demand for this enjoyable illusion drives new “ways of commodifying culture for purchase and consumption” (Lu et al, 2015, p. 37).

We can examine the authenticity of hawker food from each of these points of view.

First, looking at the authenticity of hawker food from an **objective** dimension, one needs a reference point from which to draw objective criteria. However, the vast majority of hawkers in Singapore’s history likely did not set out to be bastions of culinary tradition (even though some seem to have taken on that function today). At various stages in Singapore’s history, starting a hawker food business was an option of last resort. The Hainanese immigrants in Singapore are known as food pioneers who took up work in the service industry because other trades were already saturated by the time they arrived here in the 1800s. They are thus credited for pioneering kopitiam culture in Singapore from the 1920s (NLB, n.d.). Hawkering also became the option for many in the post-war years because of the low barriers to entry, which also explains why the chance to run a hawker stall was deemed a form of social assistance under the Hardship Scheme (Roots.sg, n.d.).

Thus, it appears that the concept of authenticity in hawker food only started to come into the picture later. The 2020 UNESCO inscription is a relatively recent, significant milestone in hawker culture being recognised as representative of Singapore. But one does not need to look back far in history to see that hawkers did not always occupy their current place of esteem in the public perception. Resettlement was not a panacea that magically transformed the itinerant hawker into a luminary representative of Singapore and Singapore culture. In fact, at one point after resettlement, the future of hawker culture was in question. One former chairman of NEA, Simon Tay, who worked at the government agency during the era of resettlements, recalled that hawker centres at one point “seemed fated to dwindle over time; a victim of Singapore's upwardly mobile aspirations”. Tay recounted:

> *“The overall experience of eating at a hawker centre stagnated and declined. Their main justification was not about culture or quality but simply to provide a basic meal at a low cost.” (Tay, 2022, at p. 156)*

An assessment of authenticity from the objective dimension must necessarily be derived from an objective reference point, and given the relatively short and rather dynamic history of hawkers and hawker centres, it is challenging to establish such a reference point. While the UNESCO inscription may provide something of a reference point, it focuses on the overall dining experience of hawker centres as “community dining rooms” for diners of diverse backgrounds — seeing the hawker centre as a place to eat and participate in activities like “chess-playing, busking and art-jamming” (UNESCO, n.d.). The absence of focus on the cuisine itself means that the authenticity of a given hawker business' offerings cannot be evaluated with reference to the UNESCO inscription alone.

Also, it may be possible for entities like the Michelin Guide to establish objective criteria for "authentic" hawker food and apply those criteria — this has been done since the Guide's inaugural 2016 edition in Singapore, with the inclusion of hawker stalls and establishments. However, such an assessment may not necessarily be definitive. The guide attracted controversy over its 2016 selection. As Joan Henderson found:

> *"Critics implied that [Michelin] inspectors were not in a position to judge cuisines and eateries overall, and especially hawkers, the choice of which was disputed. Reservations were echoed on social media where individuals complained about the unrepresentativeness and incompleteness of the selection." (Henderson, 2017, at p. 796)*

Next, we can look at authenticity in hawker food from the **constructive** dimension, which looks at socially and personally constructed perceptions of authenticity. As Girardelli points out, food is often sold in a "carefully constructed symbolic environment" that factors into restaurants' appeal to customers, or, as he calls it, a "package" — drawing from Baudrillard's conception of a "commodity-sign" which expresses the tight connection between the tangible (commodity/good) and intangible (sign/imagery)). Girardelli (2004) points out that profit-driven actors can set out to "create the right food package" in order "to deliver to the consumers the idea that the food is an authentic product".

In Singapore's hawker centres and food courts, teppanyaki-inspired dishes are served on cast iron plates and marketed interchangeably as Japanese and/or Korean — with the help of a dish of kimchi and anchovies reminiscent of the banchan (side dishes) served in Korean restaurants. One researcher described their meal of miso-grilled mackerel (or “Saba Fish”) as follows:

> *“Chinese migrant chefs' interpretation of Korean food based on Japanese culinary traditions for Singaporean consumers and served with seaweed soup, kimchi and anchovies for constructed authenticity.” (Lim, 2019, p. 98)*

Similarly, Lai’s observations of constructive authenticity in the example of the Toast Box chain are apposite:

> *“How it positions itself is therefore through its fidelity towards the past — its decor includes wooden stools, heritage items and a “butter mountain” (a huge conical shaped block of butter), and it also conducts Nanyang coffee appreciation workshops… Toast Box employees wear uniformed frocks, working amidst sacks of coffee strewn around.” (Lai, 2015, pp. 125 to 126)*

Lai describes this as “pastiche” — defined as “borrowing without intent” in a “random cannibalisation of past styles”, and where “ornaments are devoid of use value and serve only as cultural symbols hinting at an idealised past.

Figure 1: A disused bicycle lays parked amid a cluster of decorative plants outside the Toast Box Coffee House in Tiong Bahru

Lai nonetheless extends a conciliatory note to Toast Box and other “nostalgia kopitiams”, saying that they draw from local history and create nostalgia in an attempt at “placing the local in the global… especially in the face of fierce competition from global branded coffee chains”. (Lai, 2015, p. 126)

The constructive dimension of authenticity therefore points us to the broader social context. When brands try to modernise or adapt traditional elements in a way that deviates from established practice, it could still be regarded as a lesser evil from the perspective of wanting to preserve local food heritage. After all, there is great demand for cooked food in Singapore, and many parties — including mass-market international brands — stand willing to meet it.

The abovementioned difficulties in assessing authenticity point us toward the **postmodern** dimension of authenticity, where “inauthenticity is not a problem because authenticity is not about whether something is real or staged, original or replicated… but it is about how much of an enjoyable illusion it creates.” (Lu et al, 2015, p. 37)

Having examined authenticity from these three dimensions, even if an objective standard of authenticity exists for hawker food generally, and even if we wanted to hold hawker businesses to a standard of authenticity, diners may not know the difference between authentic and inauthentic. Instead, as the authors Lu, Gursoy, and Lu conclude, creating a perception of authenticity is a tool which businesses can use to appeal to customers, regardless of how one conceives of authenticity.

Therefore, I suggest that we can analyse the changes brought about by commodification not from the lens of authenticity, but by whether these changes point toward sacrificing quality, and/or standardisation and homogenisation — effects of commodification identified by Hermann.

Hermann cites the fast-food restaurant as a classic example of commodified, homogenised food where identical food items can be purchased at outlets across multiple locations, with the outlets sharing the same menu. KF Seetoh’s comments on how hawkers might respond to price pressure helps contextualise the potential impact for Singapore diners:

“...can you imagine if all of them use the same premade laksa sauce packets and they all try their level best to sell it below $2? It will just result in the same-old-same-old cut-and-paste stalls run by owners of central kitchens offering slick mediocrity. It may sound the death knell for artisanal street food professionals and food culture here will become just practical and not iconic.” (Seetoh, 2012)

3.5. Big Brands, Standardisation and Homogenisation

Coffeeshop and food court operators (whether they own or rent their space) sometimes go beyond operating the property as a manager or landlord, and get directly involved in the business of providing the cooked food. This can happen either by creating their own brands, or by partnering with/purchasing an existing brand. In economic terms, this phenomenon is known as vertical integration, where a firm occupies "successive 'levels' in the hierarchy that leads from raw materials down to the final customer" (McGee & Bassett, 1976).

Coffeeshop operator-owned brands have thus emerged, and some operators also have central kitchens which supply their brands' coffeeshop stalls with pre-cooked or pre-prepared ingredients. Vertical integration goes in both directions, as seen in the example of Koufu. Koufu manages 72 coffeeshops and food courts, and through its subsidiary Abundance Development Pte Ltd, it also manages Punggol Plaza shopping mall. And, yes — there is a Koufu food court on the first floor of Punggol Plaza.

Here's a breakdown of some big players and their respective food brands:

Table 3: A breakdown of some big players and their respective food brands

Operator	Coffeeshops and food courts operated	Owned food brands	Remarks
Kimly	84[5]	Kimly Dim Sum Kimly Zi Char Kimly Mixed Rice Tenderfresh[6]	
Kopitiam	72 locations[7] across various brands: Kopitiam, Cantine, Foodfare, Food Folks, Lau Pa Sat.	Rice Garden Warong Rice Garden	Kopitiam also runs 12 hawker centres.

[5] Kimly Group. (n.d.). Our Portfolios: Outlet. Retrieved from https://kimlygroup.sg/our-portfolios/#outlet
[6] 2021: Kimly acquired a 75% stake in Tenderfresh. Source: Tenderfresh. (2021, October 1). [Facebook Status Update]. Facebook. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/tenderfreshsg/photos/10159587193956397/?paipv=0&eav=AfZf28aqMurZXB3sndsyGvNFeAzYwnIxQwXR9nw-atMG8JebGYCG7K8lfhs8aS0D1Ac&_rdr
[7] Kopitiam. (n.d.). Our Outlets. Retrieved from https://www.kopitiam.biz/our-outlets/

Operator	Coffeeshops and food courts operated	Owned food brands	Remarks
Koufu	72 locations[8], 6 brands: Koufu: 41 Cookhouse by Koufu: 4 Rasaputra Masters: 1 Fork & Spoon: 2 Happy Hawkers: 21 Gourmet Paradise: 3	Koufu Dim Sum	Other Koufu brands (R&B Tea, 1983 coffee & toast, Dough Culture) operate separately.
BreadTalk Group	21 locations, 5 brands: Food Republic: 12[9] Food Opera: 1 Food Junction: 6[10] The Food Place: 1 The Food Market: 1	Toast Box Sergeant Chicken Rice Capitol Bak Chor Mee HeNiu Teppanyaki Piao Xiang Mala	BreadTalk Group acquired the Food Junction food court chain in 2019.
Chang Cheng Mee Wah	27 locations[11]	Chang Cheng Mixed Vegetable Rice Rong Kee Roasted Delights	
Broadway	24 locations[12] including 2 Big Appetite food courts at Funan Mall and Suntec City Mall	New Hong Kong Roasted Delights Tong Luck Mixed Rice Old Punggol Nasi Lemak[13]	
Kim San Leng	18 locations[14]	N/A	

The growing prevalence of such big operators gives rise to increasing standardisation and homogenisation — one of the effects of commodification. Looking more specifically at how this may apply to specific cuisines, chicken rice stalls could provide a rough indication of the phenomenon. Using the names of chicken rice stalls (including some stalls which sold chicken rice along with other dishes) surveyed in the Makan Index 2.0 project (Teo et al., 2023) as a springboard,

[8] Koufu. (n.d.). Leasing Opportunities. Retrieved from https://www.koufu.com.sg/join-us/leasing-opportunities/
[9] Food Republic. (n.d.). Food Republic Outlets. Retrieved from https://foodrepublic.com.sg/food-republic-outlets/
[10] Food Junction. (n.d.). Outlets. Retrieved from https://www.foodjunction.com/outlets/
[11] Chang Cheng Coffeeshop. (n.d.). Facebook. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/ChangChengCoffeeshop/
[12] Broadway. (n.d.). About Us. Retrieved from https://www.broadway.com.sg/about-us/
[13] Broadway. (n.d.). Food Services. Retrieved from https://www.broadway.com.sg/food-services/
[14] Kim San Leng. (n.d.). Locations. Retrieved from https://kimsanleng.com.sg/locations/

brands with five or more outlets were identified. Checks on the brands' websites and social media pages were done in October 2023 as a way of gathering slightly more updated figures. 11 chicken rice franchises with at least five outlets were identified.

Table 4: Chicken rice franchises with at least five outlets (as of October 2023)

Name of chain	Number of outlets
Rong Kee Roasted Delights	21
Hua Zai Hong Kong Style Roasted Delights	17
OK Chicken & Humfull Laksa	11
GAGA Roasted Delights 嘎嘎烧腊	11
Boon Chiang Hainanese Chicken Rice	11
Tong Fong Fatt Hainanese Boneless Chicken Rice	10
Xing Le Xing Hainanese Chicken Rice	8
Yishun 925 Chicken Rice	8
Wang's Roasted / Wang Wang Hainanese Chicken Rice *(fka Fong Kee Hainanese Chicken Rice)*	6
Sergeant Hainanese Chicken Rice	6
Tiong Bahru Hainanese Chicken Rice	7

Source: Data from Makan Index 2.0 by IPS Social Lab and respective brands' Facebook pages

Unsurprisingly, some of the chicken rice chains captured are owned by coffeeshop/food court chains. Rong Kee Roasted Delights is a brand under Chang Cheng (Chang Cheng, n.d.), while Sergeant Chicken Rice is one of Food Republic's brands (Food Republic, n.d.). As there does not appear to be historical data on the prevalence of hawker food brands in the past, data points such as this could be part of future studies on the impact of hawker stall chains on hawker cuisine.

The following case studies explore the process of brands scaling up a hawker business, and how standardisation takes place in that process.

Case Study 1: First Street Teochew Fish Soup

First Street Teochew Fish Soup (第一街潮州鱼汤) was started by William Lim in 1988, and the original stall in the Kovan area is still in operation today, drawing a lunch crowd and long queues. Lim's sons Desmond and Aaron previously ran four outlets which eventually had to close down. They remain involved in the business as the older Lim has reportedly decided to take a step back (Fong, 2018). As of December 2023, there are three outlets: Kovan, BreadTalk iHQ, and Seng Poh Road. The latter two outlets opened after the business entered into a tie-up with BreadTalk Group for its expansion in 2020.

Figure 2: First Street Teochew Fish Soup at BreadTalk iHQ in Tai Seng.

The expansion, Lim told local publication *8days*, came at the suggestion of BreadTalk founder and Chairman George Quek, who apparently came from the same kampung as Lim. Lim also said striking the deal with BreadTalk Group was to help "make Teochew fish soup a dish that everyone knows and enjoys", and that he and Quek have a common passion to share Teochew cuisine. Lim said he and his sons had been involved in the recruitment and selection process "months" before the expansion to BreadTalk iHQ, and said they would be involved at both outlets to ensure consistent quality. He acknowledged that customers would be the judge and that they would not come back if the quality was not maintained across the board (Fong, 2020).

Figure 3: Toast Box Coffee House in Tiong Bahru, which houses a Toast Box outlet and an outlet of First Street Teochew Fish Soup.

In terms of aesthetics, First Street has transformed significantly since it began its partnership with BreadTalk. All three outlets featured a revamped look and feel with white, blue, and red as the dominant colours. The change would have been most noticeable to regular customers who were familiar with the stall’s older forms at original Kovan location (that stall has since moved across the road to the Mee Sek Food Court as of December 2023).

Figure 4: Older iterations of the First Street signboard posted to its Facebook page in 2011 (left) and 2019 (right, featuring founder William Lim posing for a photo for a promotional event with online grocery platform RedMart).

Source: First Street Teochew Fish Soup on Facebook.[15]

First Street's Seng Poh Road outlet is the newest of the three current operational outlets (an outlet in Hougang opened in early 2022, but apparently closed before the end of that year[16]), and is housed within Toast Box Coffee House, which takes over the space vacated by Old Tiong Bahru Bak Kut Teh, a longtime fixture in the neighbourhood for some 30-plus years whose owners closed the stall due to "personal matters" (Teo, 2023). The new entrant opened in October 2023 just across the road from Tiong Bahru Market and Hawker Centre. It offers the same Nanyang Kopi and Kaya Toast as at other Toast Box outlets, but also has a selection of merchandise for sale and tourist-friendly informational panels educating visitors about Nanyang Coffee. A signboard at their merchandise counter boldly claims:

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[15] Images retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/firststreetfishsoup/photos/a.152854904766069/152854908099402 and https://www.facebook.com/firststreetfishsoup/photos/a.919841114734107/2301034789948059/

[16] The Hougang outlet was mentioned regularly in lists of outlet locations on First Street's Facebook posts up till October 2022. It stopped being mentioned from November 2022 onward.

> *"There is no better way to introduce Singapore than by savouring our local delights. Share the rich flavours and aromas of Traditional Nanyang Kopi and local favourites like Hainanese Kaya with our curated gift sets. These sets* ***encapsulate the essence of Singapore's culinary heritage****, making them the perfect choice for sharing the Singaporean experience with our loved ones." (emphasis added)*

It may seem quixotic that First Street operates in this environment, given that it seems to be of a very different category from Toast Box, given its richer history and legacy. But First Street is one of several hawker brands that have successfully scaled up in locations managed by the BreadTalk Group.

Case Study 2: Puay Heng Minced Meat Noodles and Capitol Bak Chor Mee

Puay Heng Bak Chor Mee was started by Mr Ng Chew Puay in 1979, in a coffeeshop near the old Capitol Theatre, states a Dec. 22, 2016 Facebook post by food court operator Food Republic. Puay Heng had previously operated out of other locations too, including Far East Square, where it had reportedly been invited to set up shop by Chia Boon Pin, a top executive at Far East Organisation. The invitation to Puay Heng was also extended to other hawker businesses handpicked by Chia, including well-known brand Ya Kun. The Ya Kun outlet at Far East Square remains, but Puay Heng unfortunately ended its run there sometime in 2013. Either way, many a coffeeshop/food court diner enjoyed Puay Heng's signature minced meat noodle dish, generously topped with minced meat, slices of lean meat, meatballs, fishballs, dumplings, and a fried scallop, at various locations around Singapore.

At the time of Food Republic's 2016 post promoting Puay Heng Bak Chor Mee, Puay Heng was operating in Food Republic's Wisma Atria food court under the stall name "Capitol Puay Heng Bak Chor Mee". There was also a Capitol Puay Heng outlet in the Food Junction food court in Bugis Junction. By all accounts, Puay Heng is remembered fondly. Online accounts from the 2010s note the brand's history, the fine balance of different flavours "very much in equilibrium" (Tay, 2011), and how they drew long lunchtime queues (Miracle Guru Gal, 2012). Puay Heng's 12-year-old Wisma outlet closed in September 2017. In a final update in January 2018, announcing the closure of Puay Heng's only remaining outlet in Bugis, Puay Heng's management promised updates of any new locations on its Facebook page. There have been no such updates since.

Why has Puay Heng Bak Chor Mee disappeared from the Singapore food scene? We can rule out low demand for minced meat noodles as a possible reason. In 2016, at least two other bak chor mee stalls in Food Republic food courts were in operation too, under the brand "Capitol Bak Chor Mee". The association between these stalls and Puay Heng itself is not known, but these two stalls were located in Food Republic food courts in Capitol Piazza and then-Manulife Centre (now known as Lazada One). While those two Food Republic outlets have since closed, the Capitol Bak Chor Mee brand lives on. In September 2020, Food Republic announced that Capitol Bak Chor Mee would be opening in its ION Orchard food court.

Puay Heng Capitol Bak Chor Mee and Capitol Bak Chor Mee coexisted in their respective Food Republic outlets at some point in time between 2016 and 2017 when Puay Heng exited. However, if the two brands are affiliated at all, Food Republic is not advertising it. It may well be that despite their similar names, the two brands were not related in any meaningful way. Food Republic's marketing for Capitol Bak Chor Mee can be contrasted with its promotion of Puay Heng in a 2016 Facebook post, where the Puay Heng brand was highlighted as part of a series on food stalls that could be found in Food Republic food courts. The post identified its founder (Mr Ng Chew Puay) and his successor (Chew's daughter, Siew Ling), and briefly told of the stall's origins (the stall "started out at the old Capitol Theatre in 1978"). Meanwhile, Food Republic's introduction of Capitol Bak Chor Mee touts it as such:

> *"Our very own Food Republic brand - Capitol Bak Chor Mee is now open for business, dishing out everyone's local favourite Bak Chor Mee that is reminiscent of traditional flavours from the hawker streets in the 60s."*

The write-up appears to have been carefully worded. It does not advertise a traditional recipe or state that the brand originated at any specific time period. Rather, it simply says the product is "reminiscent of traditional flavours", without elaborating on how that is achieved. The name "Capitol Bak Chor Mee" follows a tried-and-tested name template favoured by hawkers that relocated to hawker centres in the 1970s and 1980s — adding the name of a place to the dish being sold as a way of referencing the stall's original location so loyal customers would be able to identify the business (Lim & Cacciafoco, 2023). Presumably, Capitol Bak Chor Mee takes its name from the location of its first outlet, which opened in Capitol Piazza in 2016, though this part of its history is neither reflected at its outlets nor on the Food Republic website.

Figure 5: Capitol Bak Chor Mee in Food Opera at ION Orchard (Food Opera is a food court brand under Food Republic).

The story of these two minced meat noodle contemporaries illustrates the process by which a big player (in this case Food Republic) is able to establish a new brand of its own, even amid the decline of an existing and established brand selling very similar food. Both Puay Heng Minced Meat Noodle and Capitol Bak Chor Mee ceased to have any operating outlets at one point, but Food Republic was able to re-introduce the latter brand in September 2020, while Puay Heng appears consigned to history.

Case Study 3: NTUC Foodfare's Rice Garden

The above examples of hawker stalls have (or had) just a handful of outlets, but big brands are able to scale up much more significantly, tapping on practices like using central kitchens and bulk purchases of ingredients. This has certainly been the case for NTUC Foodfare and its economy rice stall brand, Rice Garden, which was introduced in 2009 to cater to seniors, NTUC union members, and those from lower-income households by providing them food at cheaper rates (Tan, 2018). As of 2022, there were 19 Rice Garden stalls with plans to have 40 stalls "by the end of the year", according to a FairPrice Group press release (FairPrice Group, 2022).

How does Rice Garden manage to provide these meals at cheaper-than-average prices? First, NTUC Foodfare buys raw ingredients in bulk and can secure better prices from suppliers. Then, there is NTUC's 17,400 square feet central kitchen, where ingredient preparation is aided by "high tech machines like blast freezers, ovens and packaging machines" before being delivered to Rice Garden stalls (Tan, 2017).

These benefits are not limited to Rice Garden stalls — they extend to all other entities under the "NTUC Foodfare Footprint" which includes NTUC's other retail outlets like Wang Café and Heavenly Wang as well as customers of its institutional catering division such as National Servicemen (NTUC Foodfare, n.d.).

Is NTUC Foodfare an example of commodification? Its stated purpose is to pursue affordability so that its food can meet the needs of certain groups, instead of doing so to increase profitability. As the entity behind it, NTUC Foodfare Co-Operative Ltd is a not-for-profit organisation, it does not face the same kinds of pressures experienced by traditional companies with shareholders, even though it does compete with them. It can also be observed that Rice Garden's standardised economic rice meals are authentic to the hawker tradition in the sense that they are aimed specifically at managing the issue of affordability of cooked food — harking back to the original hawkers whose primary target audience was the working population who relied on hawker meals.

3.6. The Limits of Commodification

Commodification, described as "a central dynamic of our time" (Hall, 2023, p. 544), may well be inevitable, but it is not unstoppable. There are some factors that can limit commodification processes and/or their effects. This section discusses the limits of the commodification of hawker food in Singapore.

Regulation

Perhaps the most obvious and apparent limit imposed on commodification is government regulation. One example is NEA's intervention in the matter of SEHCs template contracts and onerous contract terms like $600 "Food and Hygiene checks" that thankfully turned out to be optional. The issuance of a playbook and certain mandated contract terms had the effect of preventing further commodification in the hawker scene by preventing big players from flexing their bargaining power to get the contracts signed.

Other interventions in the hawker space have also arrested the process of commodification of coffeeshops, such as disallowing the sub-letting of hawker stalls, and ceasing the practice of selling HDB coffeeshops. The government's retention of ownership of new HDB coffeeshops has also paved the way for smoother implementation of other policies like the requirement for the operators to provide budget meals, even though the policy's implementation in privately-owned coffeeshops is a matter for further study.

Competition law also restricts the extent of homogenisation, as seen in the case of how Singapore's antitrust agency, the Competition and Consumer Commission of Singapore (CCCS), duly presided over both NTUC's acquisition of Kopitiam in 2018 (CCCS, 2018) and Food Republic's acquisition of Food Junction in 2019 (CCCS, 2019). The CCCS concluded that each of the acquisitions would not result in "substantial lessening of competition".

"Formal" vs "real" commodification

As part of his theory of commodification, Hermann identifies a distinction between "formal" and "real" commodification. He explains that "formal" commodification takes place when a product is priced, and thereby given a market value, and the outcome of this is the exclusion of users who are unable to afford that price. However, a product only goes through “real” commodification when its market value begins to dominate use value, seen in the way that the form or content of the product is adapted with the objective of maximising profit. Hermann then suggests that where a business opts to raise prices instead of maintaining them while sacrificing their product’s quality, the product can be seen as having undergone formal commodification without real commodification. Hermann writes:

“An increase in prices, or what may be called an acceleration of formal commodification, can also be used to prevent real commodification... This is the case, for example, when consumers are charged exceptionally high prices in order to receive a good or service that is not standardised, or in any other way affected by cost-cutting strategies. Hence commodification does not necessarily imply a deterioration of the quality of goods and services.” (Hermann, 2021, pp. 20 to 39)

This is certainly the path taken by certain hawkers who charge premium prices for exceptional offerings — such as Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodles.

Case Study 4: Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodles

Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodles was started by one Tang Joon Teo in 1932. The stall was awarded a Michelin star in the inaugural 2016 edition of the awards in Singapore (Michelin Guide, 2016), and continues to be recognised as such. Prices have risen with the times and with the stall’s increasing fame. Today, scores of diners line up daily to happily hand over S$8 for each “regular”-sized bowl of noodles. In the writer’s opinion, the size of a “regular” bowl is slightly larger than a typical minced meat noodle serving, but Hill Street Tai Hwa’s “small” bowls are also priced above average, at S$6 each (up from S$4 in 2016). “Expect to queue any time of the day,” warns the Michelin Guide website (Michelin Guide, n.d.) — for the stall’s loyal regulars, affordability is clearly not a concern.

Figure 6: Expect to pay $8 for a “Regular” bowl of noodles from Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodles.

It is currently located in a coffeeshop at Crawford Lane, and the Guide classifies Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodles as a “street food” establishment, possibly owing to the history of the minced meat noodle dish with vinegar-laced sauce and how it’s said to have originated from the streets of Singapore. History is no doubt important for Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodles, which has taken pains to establish its reputation as the sole inheritor of founder Tang Joon Teo’s legacy. “All the other outlets you see in food courts do not belong to us,” states Tai Hwa on its website (Tai Hwa Pork Noodle, n.d.), confidently stressing its authenticity and saying it has “only 1 branch but millions of guests”. The efforts have even gone to the extent of suing a relative in court. In 2008, owner Tang Chay Seng, a son of the founder, alleged that his nephew Arthur Tang had infringed the business’ trademark by starting a stall in VivoCity named “Lau Dai Hua” and making use of the original outlet’s reputation to promote the new stall (Chong, 2010). While Tang’s suit failed, the judge noted a "likelihood of confusion" between the original stall and the new one and awarded S$1,000 in nominal damages. In 2021, the stall took out newspaper advertisements to proclaim their status as the “only authentic” version of Tai Hwa Pork Noodles, stating for posterity that they had been in business for “more than 80 years” (How, 2021)[17]. Clearly, authenticity is a key consideration for Tai Hwa Pork Noodles, as it has chosen not to compete based on price, but on quality — in Hermann’s words, the dish may have gone through formal commodification, but not real commodification.

Figure 7: A rare midday lull in the crowd at Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodles.

Decommodification

Commodification may be inevitable, but it is not unstoppable, and it is also not irreversible. The reverse process of commodification has been conceptualised as “singularisation”. “Culture ensures that some things remain unambiguously singular, it resists the commoditisation of others; and it sometimes resingularises what has been commoditised,” writes Igor Kopytoff (Kopytoff, 1986, p. 73). In other words, there are no inferior copies if there are no copies.

[17] Michelin-starred Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodle is not to be confused with Michelin Bib Gourmand award recipient Tai Wah Pork Noodle. The latter is currently run by a nephew of Tang Chay Seng.

Case Study 5: Lao Chaozhou

老潮州 (“Lao Chaozhou” or “Old Teochew”) is a nondescript hawker stall serving mee siam and satay bee hoon. The business started in 2016 when Grace Lim, 65, decided that enough was enough — if hawker centre food wasn’t going to improve, she would have to leave her Peninsula Plaza photo studio in the good hands of her son, and be the change she wanted to see. “不好, 做到好,” (“if it’s no good, [we’ll] keep doing it until it gets good”) Lim told this writer, recounting the days when she and her husband first started out. By all accounts, they have reached that goal. The Lao Chaozhou stall in Ghim Moh Market & Food Centre draws snaking queues. It is open five days a week (closed on Tuesday and Wednesday), mainly serving the breakfast crowd. On some days, the earlier lunchtime patrons might stand a chance too — the food often sells out before noon (this writer found out the hard way).

Figure 8: 老潮州 (Lao Chaozhou) at Ghim Moh Market closed for the day, after selling out at around 2pm.

Lim says her recipes started as lists of ingredients given to her by friends.

> *"They taught us how to make (the dishes) and showed us the ingredients. Then we had to create the recipe on our own. We had to go and think up our own recipe. There was nothing special about what they taught us, so we had to adjust to make it special."*

What guided them in formulating their winning recipes? Lim said:

> *"For such things, it's about whether you have the passion for food. With passion, you'll know how to innovate. It's the same when you learn something, even if it's playing games or something. You'll be able to design something really good. It's like that because you have a lot of interest. Once you're familiar with something you can adapt. It's the same with food."*

The long queues at Lim's stall eventually caught the attention of Select Group, which, in addition to its catering business and retail concepts — including Texas Chicken, Pho Street, and Hong Kong Sheng Kee Dessert — runs several "thematic" food courts in Changi Airport, along with Get Together Coffee Shop, a chain with four outlets across Singapore. Select Group representatives approached Lim proposing a collaboration, and Lao Chaozhou soon expanded to new locations and even offered ready-to-eat microwaveable meals for sale in 7-Eleven outlets in Singapore, under Select Group's Taste Asia brand (Tan, 2022). The collaboration would see Lim and her husband receiving a proportion of the profits from the new outlets and retail sales at 7-Eleven.

Lao Chaozhou had an outlet in a coffeeshop at Block 829, Tampines Street 81, at one point. But most diners would probably not immediately have identified it as an offshoot of the original 老潮州 from Ghim Moh. The Tampines stall's main signboard retained the green and red used on the original, but with adjustments to the shade. Also, the new signboard included the English translation of the stall's name ("Old Teochew"), making the two signboards visually quite different.

Figure 9: Shopfronts at 老潮州 (Lao Chaozhou) at Ghim Moh Market (left) and Old Teochew in Tampines (right).

The new coffeeshop stall had a cleaner, neater aesthetic, with high-resolution photos of the products printed on lighted boards. Meanwhile, the original stall also has a board showcasing its offerings, with the older and much smaller pictures partly obscured by the addition of stickers stating the current prices, after unavoidable price revisions over time. Old Teochew in Tampines also had a significantly larger space and a shopfront with an electronic signboard displaying reviews of the food from various publications.

Figure 10: Shop signage at 老潮州 (Lao Chaozhou) at Ghim Moh Market (left) and Old Teochew in Tampines (right).

The range of menu options at Tampines was also wider, with dishes that are not currently sold at the Ghim Moh stall, such as cuttlefish jellyfish kangkong with fruits. Prices also varied: satay bee hoon was priced $0.50 higher in Tampines for both “Small” and “Big” plates, though mee siam remained at $4 at both locations.

Aside from the food itself, perhaps the biggest and most obvious difference was the lack of a queue at the Tampines outlet and the implications of that on the new stall's viability. When interviewed for this paper in October 2023, Lim said the outlet had not generated sufficient earnings for her to receive any profit sharing. She was thankfully not required to cover any losses, however.

Why was the success of the Ghim Moh stall not able to be replicated elsewhere? Lim shared that quality control was a challenge. It was not as simple as following her secret recipe — she said it was also important to taste the food as it was being prepared, and adjust the proportions depending on the particular taste of the ingredients, especially given variations in fresh produce which might yield a sweeter or more sour gravy. While Lim was personally involved in training the workers for the Tampines outlet, she was not able to personally supervise or manage them as she spent most of her time in the Ghim Moh stall. Lim said she considered the collaboration with Select Group a learning experience, one she agreed to embark on with the sustainability of her business in mind. She had been thinking about possible ways for her and her husband to take a step back from personally manning a hawker stall as they get older.

Sometime in November 2023, the Tampines outlet closed down, and a different stall now operates in its place.

Case Study 6: Kay Lee Roast Meat Joint

A similar example of singularisation can be found in Kay Lee Roast Meat Joint, which was acquired in 2014 at the eye-watering price of S$4 million by electronics conglomerate Aztech Group. From its original location in Upper Paya Lebar Road, the brand went on to spawn outlets in relatively more upmarket locations such as Suntec City Mall, where it opened a 2,500 sq ft restaurant with room for up to 100 diners in 2015 (Quek, 2015). While Kay Lee Roast Meat Joint's story certainly stood out for the amount of money involved in the transaction, it must be noted that the S$4 million price tag included the property on which Kay Lee stood, which was valued at S$2.1 million at the time, according to a 2014 article quoting Aztech chairman Michael Mun (Quek, 2014). Kay Lee Roast Meat is also notable for Aztech Group's ambitious expansion plans, which were disclosed to the media with remarkable transparency, but which ultimately could not be realised. The anticipated state — of having a central kitchen supervised by chefs, along with decentralised operations at various outlets with lower-skilled and lower-waged "choppers" portioning out the meats at 10 outlets — did not play out in the envisioned timeframe of two years.

While Jeremy Mun, then-Aztech senior VP and marketing head, said the purchase was "not about making money" but rather about "preserving a heritage brand" by extending the life of the Kay Lee brand, it stands as a textbook example of commodification. The operating model of a central kitchen with "choppers" portioning out the meat at outlets was conceived with standardisation and homogenisation as a primary goal. Furthermore, at the point of Kay Lee's acquisition, Aztech Group was a listed company with obligations to its shareholders. Michael Mun also estimated that the Group would be able to "make the money back in two to three years".

Aztech's Michael Mun told The Edge Singapore in a 2021 interview that the Kay Lee brand was no longer owned by Aztech. "We don't have it anymore," he was quoted as saying (Lim, 2021). Indeed, a check in November 2023 on public data from Singapore's Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority shows that Kay Lee Pte Ltd — the entity behind the Kay Lee brand, which was originally set up as an Aztech subsidiary (Quek, 2014) — is owned by a single shareholder, an individual. The outlets started under the Kay Lee Roast Meat brand have also closed, and the business operates at a single outlet in its original location.

4. DISCUSSION

This paper set out to establish a baseline for understanding Hermann's theory of commodification as it applies to the hawker scene in Singapore, and examining its effects on specific hawker businesses. The examples of commodification highlighted above show how the commodification of a given hawker business can have the effects of affecting affordability and promoting standardisation and homogenisation. The paper also looks at the limits of commodification and suggests that certain elements — namely government regulation and competition — have acted as a counterbalance to commodification's impact on the hawker scene.

4.1. Competition Limits Commodification's Effects

When it comes to the hawker scene in Singapore, competition appears to be a significant factor that limits the commodification of a business as it expands. To scale up successfully, a business needs to be able to win customers, as even established businesses' offshoots may not survive if quality control is not ensured.

Hawker businesses may choose to compete via a number of different strategies, with one being to aim to present "authentic" offerings by preserving traditional tastes, or even by creating a narrative of authenticity through historical narrative or restaurant design. Yet another means is to compete on affordability, which the example of NTUC Foodfare amply highlights. It would also be viable to compete with a mixture of these strategies.

4.2. Commodification: Evaluation

Commodification can be an effect of various tools F&B establishments may employ. But, as Hermann says, "markets, money, competition, and the profit motive" are not markers of commodification necessarily. Instead, he suggests that these are “instruments for subjugating use value to market value”. As the case studies show, those same tools can also be implemented in service of other objectives — the provision of affordable food in convenient settings, the preservation of a business’ longevity, and so on. Commodification can be the result in some cases, but government regulation and the competitive landscape place a real limit on the extent to which hawker food can be commodified, even when big brands get involved.

Duffy and Ng (2021) looked at all of the text related to food on the Singapore Tourism Board website. All 37,000 words were manually gathered in January 2018. Three dualities were identified: **Heritage and innovation**, **diversity and unity**, and **local and international**. The authors explain how these three binaries are used in the promotion of hawker culture in Singapore to international visitors. I propose that there could be a fourth duality: **accessible and authentic**. There may be different kinds of motives in the hawker space, and looking at it through the lens of commodification theory shows that there are some in pursuit of providing affordable, convenient food that the majority of the population can access, even while others seek to promote culture, cuisine, or even their own business’ legacy, as their respective strategies in a competitive market.

5. AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Here are some suggested areas for further research, in two areas: The **operations** of hawker centre/food court/coffeeshop operators, and **hawker culture** more generally.

5.1. Operator/Hawker Stall Operations

Extent of big brands’ dominance: Some coffeeshop operators own brands which operate stalls in their coffeeshops, as described above, in the section covering vertical integration. In addition to this, some operators also “curate” brands for their coffeeshops (Kim San Leng, n.d.),[18] and those brands typically operate in multiple coffeeshops under the same operator. Could this dissuade or even deter new entrants? It would be useful to quantify the extent of big brands' dominance in this regard, and to look into how these partnerships enhance or entrench them in specific cases.

Budget meals: The newly-mandated provision of budget meals in HDB coffeeshops may be an area that is ripe for study, since much of the policy's success will depend on how it is implemented. The consequences of non-compliance have not been publicly laid out, and the way that the policy will be implemented appears to rely heavily on operators' ability to dictate conditions for stalls in their purview. Future studies could look into topics such as how operators go about enforcing the budget meal requirement, how stalls have to adjust their operating model to be able to provide these budget meals, and how such budget meals compare to regular hawker fare (in terms of quality, nutritional value, variety, etc.).

Opening hours: Adhering to mandated minimum opening hours can be a challenge for hawkers — perhaps especially so for those operating in hawker centres where the pool of eligible workers is more limited due to the requirement of Singapore citizenship or Permanent Resident status. Some operators have said they do not set operating hours for older hawkers, but only do so for new tenants. How do hawkers deal with such requirements, and how does it affect their operating model?

5.2. Hawker Culture

Defining the term "hawker": As alluded to earlier in this paper, the "hawker"category in Singapore is not one with clear boundaries. At the moment, the most definitive use of the term is by government agencies, in reference to the

[18] Kim San Leng's website states: "At Kim San Leng Food Centre, we take pride in curating a diverse and high-quality selection of tenants to offer our customers a wide variety of delicious options as well as supporting our tenants in multiple ways."

stallholders who have a “hawker stall licence” (also referred to as a “food stall licence”) to operate their stalls in government hawker centres (NEA, n.d.). But the term is also adopted (fairly or unfairly) by food businesses operating elsewhere. Just to name a few examples: Select Group’s “Hawkers' Street” at ION Orchard, Fei Siong Group’s rendition of a “modernised kopitiam” called “SG Hawker” with locations at Clarke Quay and Tanglin Mall. Besides the question “What is a hawker business?”, another tricky question would be: “*Who* is a hawker?” If the label should be reserved for only some individuals, the clearest category would be those who plied their trade on the streets, in the truest sense of the word “hawker”. Should we expand the definition to include the descendants of those “original” hawkers who have taken over the reins? What if the successor has completely revamped the stall’s offerings (as was the case for the now-closed Uggli Muffins in Toa Payoh which operated as a bakery after second-generation hawker Anton Tan converted his parents' zichar business (Chua, 2023))? What about a non-relative successor who purchased the original hawker’s secret recipe? These definitions could be important if, at some point in the future, there are initiatives seeking to preserve “hawker food” (distinct from “hawker culture” in the UNESCO inscription).

Figure 11: Select Group's "Hawkers' Street" at ION Orchard which houses outlets from various hawker brands.

Reproducibility of hawker cuisine: Why have certain brands been able to scale up with better results than others? Are there certain categories of hawker food which are less likely to be reproducible across multiple locations?

Authenticity: How do we understand hawker businesses' attempts to present themselves as "authentic" to diners? How is authenticity defined, and how can hawker businesses pursue or preserve authenticity? What support would be most beneficial for "authentic" hawker businesses? When, if at all, can it be said that brands are fabricating authenticity?

Perception of authenticity: Related to, but distinct from the previous point, is the question: How do diners perceive the authenticity of hawker businesses? And, to what extent do diners make their dining decisions based on authenticity (or perceived authenticity)?

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