

All You Can Obey: Design as Surveillance at Hodai All-You-Can-Eat Restaurant Yogyakarta

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Abstract

This research examines how Visual Communication Design acts as a disciplinary and surveillance method for customers at Hodai All You Can Eat restaurant in Yogyakarta. This paper uses Michel Foucault's concepts of disciplinary and surveillance power. The method used in this research is a qualitative research method with a genealogical approach. Using Foucault's concept, the writer would like to study the combination of disciplinary and surveillance power with visual communication design in product catalogue design, banners, signages, buffet tags, and warnings, which influence the customer experience and behaviour while dining at the restaurant. The writer would like to see how disciplinary and surveillance power manifested through visual communication strategies through copywriting and icon usage. In the end, the writer would like to give a critical reflection on Foucault's theory on how visual communication design can serve as a panopticon in daily life.

Keywords: *Visual Communication Design, Disciplinary, Surveillance, Michel Foucault, All You Can Eat Restaurant.*

Introduction

In early November 2023, my colleague and I went to Hodai All You Can Eat Restaurant. Hodai is a rather new restaurant in Yogyakarta that serves an all-you-can-eat Japanese yakiniku and suki. Hodai is originally a restaurant brand from Malang. It opened its first branch in Yogyakarta in June of the same year. The public interest in all-you-can-eat restaurants in Yogyakarta has been increasing. In 2024, there are more than 20 all-you-can-eat restaurants and 4 all-you-can-eat chains in Yogyakarta. There is no particular reason why all-you-can-eat restaurants are being looked for. However, many youngsters would look for all-you-can-eat restaurants, especially barbecue restaurants, because of their desire for beef¹. During my visit there, many youngsters and young salarywomen are having an early dinner at Hodai.

As a culinary fan who also worked in an all-you-can-eat restaurant, I was amazed by the visual display and intricate service. Upon arrival, we were greeted by the cashier and were offered the menu which was displayed in front of the cashier. A set of all-you-can-eat rules is displayed adjacent to the cashier table, including the height measurement for children. The systems are paid in front, right after ordering the menus. As we finish our payment, we are taking our meals to the buffet. There were many signs reminding us to be mindful and warning us about the food charge.

All these regulation and signage designs which are crafted intricately through their visual identity with detailed illustrations and attractive colours remind me of Foucault's concept of disciplinary and surveillance power. I argue that these designs are disciplinary and surveillance power to ensure safety and comfort while in the restaurant, but also objected to be surveilled.

¹ Based on customer research at my previous job, I asked various young adults who came to BongOBong—Hodai's direct competitor—the reason why they went to all-you-can-eat restaurant is their love for beef and sauce.

This shows also how an all-you-can-eat restaurant which promises the freedom on how many you take the buffets and meals, also comes with a price of being surveilled, being seen even through the design and signage system.

In this article, I would like to question: Firstly, what are the disciplinary methods of visual communication design in Hodai?; Second, how does this visual communication design contribute to the panopticism of all-you-can-eat? To answer these questions, I would like to discuss Foucault's concept of surveillance power. Then, I would like to break down my experience at Hodai through the surveillance power. This would explain how visual communication is a surveillance method. Lastly, I would like to reflect on how Foucault's panopticon can happen through visual communication design in daily life.

Research Method

This paper uses a qualitative method, using Foucault's disciplinary and surveillance power approach for analysis. The data was collected during a visit to Hodai All You Can Eat restaurant in Yogyakarta, in early November 2023. The data is collected by observing the visual designs, surroundings, service, and restaurant layout. The signages and food tags are documented by one of my colleagues. Then, the data are analysed through Foucault's surveillance power approach. This is to point out how the surveillance power manifests through visual communication design.

Foucault's Surveillance Power

Foucault exploration of disciplinary and surveillance power was initially a study about the shift of carceral power. In his book, "Discipline and Punish" (1977) he argues that carceral power, which initially took the form of public, ceremonial, and physical punishment, changed into private and orderly forms. He argues how power and knowledge can change the narrative of punishment from physical and open punishment to a more 'humane' punishment with the establishment of prisons (Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 1977). However, this is not limited to prison, it also affects other institutions, such as schools, psychotherapy, barracks and hospitals. The shift in carceral power changes how punishment occurs. Punishment doesn't target the physical body but the soul (Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 1977). Hence, power creates what Foucault called normalisation. Normalisation results from disciplinary and surveillance power through certain strategies and mechanisms. The phrase for people who are normalised through disciplinary and surveillance power is called docile bodies.

In addition to producing normalisation of subjects, the discipline also produces what Foucault called individualisation, specifically making individuals as a different case, unique from other individuals. Power in the form of supervision, observation, and individual comparison results in the knowledge produced taking the form of individuality.

Certain strategies and mechanisms to discipline are classifications, control of activity, setting the time schedule and control of the ability to do something (Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 1977). This also comes with another surveillance power: observation through supervising officers, assessment and testing. (Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 1977).

Surveillance power is also provided by the specific architectural design which Foucault called a panopticon. The panopticon is a Bentham model of prison. Panopticon serves “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 1977: 201). The panopticon is built for “sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it” (Foucault 1977:201). Hence, the panopticon, or any architectural power such as schools, hospitals, jails, and even restaurants, is designed to observe the people as objects. People inside the panopticon may be “invested by its effects of power, which [they] bring to [themselves] since [they are] part of its mechanism” (Foucault 1977:217)

With discipline and surveillance power, people are treated as objects to be studied. They are classified, instructed, monitored, awarded and punished inside the system. People comply with the instructions, avoid getting into trouble, follow the time regulations, and encourage themselves to pass the test to succeed, escape or move to a ‘better’ discipline and surveillance power.

The nature of visual communication design as political power has been discussed by many scholars (Young 2009:124, Pater 2016:2). As Pater said, design “cannot be disconnected from the values and assumptions in which it was created, from the ideologies behind it.” (Pater 2016:2). Pater argues that ideologies are perceived natural in visual communication design, hence why correlates ideology and design are difficult (Pater 2016:2). Although, in Foucault’s approach, ideology will be the subtle power that exists in dynamically which create power relations (Foucault 1978:94). Hence, power is “permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these mobilities, the concatenation that rests on each of them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement” (Foucault 1978:93).

Discussion

Coming to Hodai, we are greeted by the waitress. The greeter opens the door and encourage us to go directly through the cashier. The waitress and cashier in this restaurant are served as surveillance power by observing the customers. They are employed to ensure every buffet menu are displayed, serve the premium buffet menu, and help with the grill and suki stove. However, they are also employed to watch for customers who might do misconduct activities at the restaurant by not paying or saving food in their storage so they won’t get charged.

The menu was displayed through the acrylic: Regular, Grill + Suki, and Premium Grill + Suki. Each menu has a different price with different buffet offers. For suki menu, customers can take steamboat buffets from the freezer. For customers who order premium buffet, some of the menu has to be served and ordered through the waiters. There are also menu boards in the back of the cashier. We chose the Regular menu and paid them in front. There is a bonus gift for customers who order through reservations. The all-you-can-eat rules are provided beside the cashier. These rules inform the customers that the prices applied are per person, not per package. This is to prevent the customer cheats on how many packages they buy or mistaking it as a package price. The “all-you-can-eat” menu is a selling system in restaurants, where consumers only pay once to enjoy all the available menus with a buffet concept. On the “all-you-can-eat” menu, all food can be eaten as much as desired in one payment. As Iriyadi stated an all-you-can-eat restaurant “has the potential to make consumers take food with portions more than the capacity that can be accepted by the stomach, leading to food waste” (Iriyadi et al. 2023:7)

There is a time limit on the All You Can Eat feast. This shows how the time limitation is a part of the rules, a disciplinary power, to control the customer. There are two scenarios: This is to prevent customers from taking many meals and buffets which can create loss for the restaurant. Second, this is so any customer in waiting can get into any available seat. When we're almost finished, the waiter surveils us and reminds us that our feast time is almost finished.

There's a food charge for food that is wasted. This, in Foucault's terms, serves as a punishment for wasting food. Besides encouraging us to be mindful of our consumption, this is also to avoid causing losses for the restaurant. There are consequences when customers misbehave and misconduct at the restaurant. Additionally, any leftover food should not be taken away by the customer. If a customer is caught taking away their food, they would be charged. There are also extra charges for customers who exceed their time. All these rules are made to 'normalise' the restaurant situation, so the customer would obey them and enjoy their meal.

There is also a set of rules for children's height who come to the restaurant. If the children's height measures below 110 cm, they can have a free package. If their height is measured between 110 cm and 140 cm, they only pay Rp 49.000,- for all packages. For children above 140 cm, they must pay the normal price. Another pricing strategy classification based on height may be assumed because children typically eat less, so they don't have to pay full price. But also, this payment is what makes the children, teenagers, and adult customers different, hence being treated and warned differently.



Picture 1. Hodai's All You Can Eat rules. There are two rules: first, a general rule for all-you-can-eat feast. Second, a guide for price application for children according to the height measurement.

Source: Putra Adi Prasetyo, 202

There are no significant signs to show which customer ordered a specific menu. Since we didn't order Suki, the waiters only helped us with the stove and instructed us on how to use it. The waiters and waitresses assisted us on several occasions, such as responding to our questions about the buffet and sauce menu, explaining the grill systems, and helping us light up the grill stove. For the customers who ordered Suki, they are being given additional stoves and pots.

The more interesting part is the signs which are placed through their buffet. These signs reminded customers to take care of their belongings and children without supervision. Hence, the supervision of the customer's belongings and family is not part of the restaurant's responsibility. There is also a sign indicating that the buffet menu is regularly refilled, ensuring customers enjoy the buffet without the fear of running out. There is a reminder to finish the food which has already been taken from the buffet. There is also a prohibition to not taking the food away from the restaurant. These prohibitions, warnings, and reminders are part of the surveillance power to normalise the feast at Hodai. This also produces knowledge for customers to check on themselves and encourages self-surveillance for themselves.



Picture 2. Hodai's signage and warnings. These are placed in the buffet area to remind and warn customers
Source: Putra Adi Prasetyo, 2023

Even though the signage design is a disciplinary and surveillance power, it is part of a bigger surveillance power in the all-you-can-eat system. Firstly, the CCTV is placed strategically to monitor the people around the barbeque. Whitaker argues that CCTV surveillance, in many cases the people subjected to panoptic power welcome the increased surveillance as it facilitates daily life and convenience, enhances security and empowers customers (Whitaker, 1999). CCTV wasn't only made for the restaurant owners to examine theft and burglary that happens by the customer or within the restaurant, but ironically it also to keep customers safe.

Davies argues that CCTV is "combating as 'anti-social behaviour', such as littering, urinating in public, traffic violations, obstruction and drunkenness" (Davies 1998). This is to minimise the customer misbehaviour that may cheat the system: Look out for the number of customers who come and match it with the number of packages ordered, look out for customers who have taken the food away from the restaurant, look out for the customers who take too much and waste food.

Panopticon also happens in the restaurant's layout. There is only one exit door, which is the way where customers come and go. The waiter is always ready to greet the customers who are coming and leaving the establishment. The other exit door was in the east of the building, it was a way through to the toilet room and prayer room. Although customers were able to leave through the east door, no one had left through that exit. But they can also be supervised by other staff who do the dishwashing beside the toilet room and the staff who come and go to the staff room. Therefore, the panopticon is a large system.

It doesn't exist only through multiple CCTV nor the restaurant layout but also through the visual communication design. The surveillance power aims to ensure that everyone in the restaurant is seen and watched constantly. Firstly, the customers are informed through the set of rules. Secondly, the cashier, waiters and staff act as surveillance power to observe the customers on their conduct and allotted time while also serving them. Thirdly, the signs at the buffet remind the customers of the set of rules, watch for ourselves and eventually create docile bodies inside the restaurant.

The signs imposed in the buffet system serve as a disciplinary and surveillance power. The signs are instilling the fear of the charges and consequences for misconduct. This practice serves to sustain the business by creating responsibility to the customers and ensuring profitability. The 'normalisation' of consuming All You Can Eat buffets isn't for the sake of the customers only, but also to create a profit for the restaurant.

Conclusion

The signs, copywriting, and banners in Hodai All You Can Eat restaurant through Foucault's surveillance power are a reminder that visual communication design can serve as a panopticon to create normalisation and individualisation of people. The surveillance power can be a tool for governmentality, another Foucault concept on how things can be governed for prosperity. But the prosperity here is only for the business profit, not the well-being of the customer.

The pseudo-freedom of all-you-can-eat restaurants signifies that every regulation and surveillance system is only a tool to regulate oneself. The customers are responsible for themselves, therefore they must discipline and surveil themselves, their friends and their personal belongings. The panopticon serves to create a business profit, to make sure no one is cheating the system and everything runs smoothly for the business.

As Foucault said: power produces knowledge and knowledges produce power, surveillance power produces new knowledge to gain new data and insight for the business. This knowledge can be transformed into new designs and campaigns that will attract more customers. In the end, surveillance power can manifest in various forms, including visual communication design.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Putra Adi Prasetyo for helping me provide the pictures from our visit to Hodai along with Meylana Narulita. Although this paper isn't funded, the visit to Hodai was partially paid for by Makan Minum Group for competitor research.

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