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What Are You Really Buying? FJU Students' Opinions on Eslite Bookstore and its Adoption on Cultural Commodification Strategy

Research Paper, English Composition III

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Topic: What Are You Really Buying? FJU Students' Opinions on Eslite Bookstore and its Adoption on Cultural Commodification Strategy

Outline:

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- I. Introduction
 - a. The digital rivals' negative influence on bookstores
 - b. Eslite Bookstore as the most distinguished bookstore in Taiwan
 - c. Thesis statement
 - II. Literature Review
 - a. News: Possible contract between FJU and Eslite Bookstore
 - b. Article: Eslite Bookstore as a cultural trend in Taiwan
 - c. Paper: Taiwan's Business Operation of Cultural Products
 - III. Research Purpose
 - a. Purpose
 - b. Research Questions
 - IV. Method
 - a. Setting
 - b. Survey
 - c. Interview
 - V. Analysis
 - a. Findings
 - b. Discussion
 - VI. Suggestion and Conclusion
 - VII. Works Cited
 - VIII. Appendix

What Are You Really Buying? FJU Students' Opinions on Eslite Bookstore and its Adoption on Cultural Commodification Strategy

This is an era of technology. It seems that many things in our life are influenced by it, including "books." Recent years, bookstores in many countries close down because of the "digital rivals." Take America for example, the major book retailer Barnes & Noble are shutting down because of its management struggles. This phenomenon also happens in many

bookstores in Taiwan, except one –Eslite Bookstore. Established in 1989, Eslite Bookstore has now become the largest bookstore, running more than forty stores in Taiwan and one in Hong Kong. Apparently, Eslite Bookstore has its successful business management with effective strategies that help its business to excel.

Additionally, according to the news on *Chinatimes.com* in the end of 2013, Eslite Bookstore and Uni-President Enterprises Cooperation both wanted to sign a contract with Fu Jen Catholic University, hoping to open branches on campus at the Archbishop Lokuang Student Activity Center. According to Fu Jen University's spokesman, "the school highly welcomes the idea of having companies such as Eslite Bookstore on campus" (Xie).

According to Johan Nylander's article on CNN "Nightclubs for literature? Why Book selling is booming in Taiwan," the author mentions bookstores around the globe are closing down one by one mainly due to the rise of digital age but there are still exceptions such as Taiwan's Eslite Bookstore. The author further points out that Eslite Bookstore is no longer only a bookstore but has also become a popular "cultural trend" in Taiwan and established its own unique style. "Many cool people hang out here. Some come here to read, others just to kill time and meet friends. It's like a place for modern culture and it's close to some of the best nightclubs and bars," said one of the customers interviewed by Nylander at Eslite Bookstore. Moreover, the author points out that instead of compromising on the shutdown trend of bookstores, Eslite Bookstore is "making the store as much a place for books as it is for design, fashion and home styling, small cafes and restaurant" (Nylander).

Since Eslite Bookstore is a real success in the bookstore industry in Taiwan, many papers examining its success could be found, including Wei Chou Chen's "Taiwan's Business Operation of Cultural Products: A Case Study of Eslite Bookstore." This paper written in Chinese introduces cultural commodification in Taiwan, and focuses on Eslite Bookstore as his research target. One of the author's main issues in his research is Taiwan's development on "cultural and creative industry," and further uses Eslite Bookstore as the target of his case study. The author provides Eslite Bookstore's history, SWOT analysis, and its management style. Chen further points out that Eslite Bookstore's strengths that make it stand out from other bookstore in Taiwan could also be its weaknesses.

Based on two problems that exist at this point, the researcher found it crucial to conduct this study for two reasons. First of all, although in the past, there are many studies related to Eslite Bookstore, none of them focused on youngster's consumption patterns and their view on Eslite Bookstore's use of "cultural commodification" as its business strategy. Secondly, the news reported that Eslite Bookstore would like to sign a contract with Fu Jen

Catholic University. As long as Eslite Bookstore starts a branch on FJU's campus, the success of its business management strategies will mainly rely on whether they are well-received by the students. The researcher attempted to look into youngster's attitude toward Eslite Bookstore in general, and their opinion on its adoption of cultural commodification through surveys. The findings could be used to predict the likelihood of Eslite Bookstore's success on FJU campus, and allow other bookstores in Taiwan to have an understanding on college student's general consumption pattern at bookstores and their views on cultural commodification as a business strategy.

The significance of the research is shown in the following three aspects: First of all, the findings in the study are believed to help bookstores in Taiwan to succeed. Secondly, collecting FJU undergraduate students' consumption pattern and their opinions on Eslite Bookstore's business strategy could help Eslite Bookstore's sales department understand college student's views, and help Eslite Bookstore improve or adjust their business strategy when necessary. Thirdly, the findings can help increase young people's awareness of Eslite's use of cultural commodification business strategy. Therefore, the researcher has set up the research questions as follows:

- A. Central question: What are the FJU undergraduate students' overall views on Eslite Bookstore?
- Sub-question a: What are the consumption patterns of FJU undergraduate students at Eslite Bookstore?
 - Sub-question b: What do FJU undergraduate students consider the main reasons that make Eslite Bookstore stand out among all the bookstores in Taiwan?
 - Sub-question c: What are FJU undergraduate students' views on Eslite Bookstore's adoption of cultural commodification strategy?

A survey and face-to-face interviews were used to answer the research question. The setting was at Fu Jen University campus in April 2015, and the participants were FJU undergraduate students from age 18 to age 23. There were 50 valid completed questionnaires, and 5 interviewees from the same pool. The procedure for the data collection included three parts. First, the researcher designed the online questionnaire in Google docs, using snowball sampling strategy to circulate the online questionnaires via Facebook, which was the most commonly used social networking site in Taiwan. Secondly, regarding the interview, the researcher selected the interviewees randomly from the survey pool. Then, the researcher contacted them and got their permission for interview. After the researcher got 5 interviewees,

the random selection ended. Lastly, The researcher interviewed 5 interviewees on campus, and recorded their responses.

The questionnaire first required participants to read a short passage, which gave them a brief understanding on this study, and reminded them that only students from FJU could fill out the questionnaire. The researcher also provided a brief definition of “cultural commodification” based on Jenkins definition: it is “how cultural products function as commodities that are manufactured and distributed to meet the demands of a consuming public.” The main questions were divided into four sections: the respondents’ personal background questions, consumption patterns at Eslite Bookstore, comparison of features of Eslite Bookstore and other chain bookstores, and their opinions on cultural commodification. The first section, personal background questions, checked the respondents’ gender, what school year they attended, and whether they knew Eslite Bookstore. This section served as a threshold, assuring the results would be valid. Section two investigated FJU students’ consumption patterns at Eslite Bookstore, including their visiting frequency, purchasing frequency, the most and least bought products and the reasons for it. By this means, the researcher could analyze FJU students’ general consumption pattern at Eslite Bookstore. Section three focused on the comparison of features of Eslite Bookstore and other chain bookstores. The questions in this section were designed for the respondents to select the most special features of Eslite Bookstore and to define whether these features were comparatively positive or negative to other chain bookstores in Taiwan. Last but not least, Section four required the respondents to offer their opinions on the cultural commodification strategy with multiple-choice questions and opening questions. At the beginning of this section, the researcher provided a brief definition of cultural commodification, and allowed the participants to answer the subsequent questions without misunderstanding any important concepts in the survey. The complete questionnaire is included in the appendix.

There were three interview questions designed based on the questionnaire. Yet the slight differences between questionnaire and interview were that interview were carried out in face-to-face conversations and in a quite relaxing atmosphere. Hence, the researcher could receive more open-ended answers and have more extended discussions with the interviewees as they related the questions with personal experiences. With the interviewees’ responses, the researcher collected detailed answers that could support and explain the results. The complete interview questions are included in the appendix.

The survey collected 50 valid questionnaires. After data analysis, the researcher came up with the following findings.

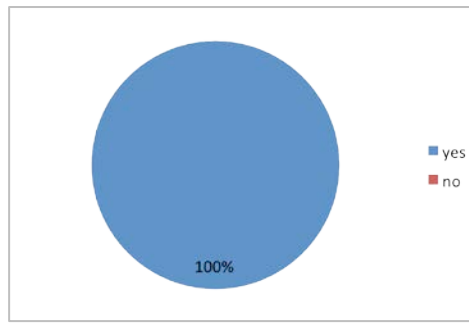


Fig. 1 Are you familiar with Eslite Bookstore?

Fig. 1 points out that all of the student participants from FJU are familiar with Eslite Bookstore.

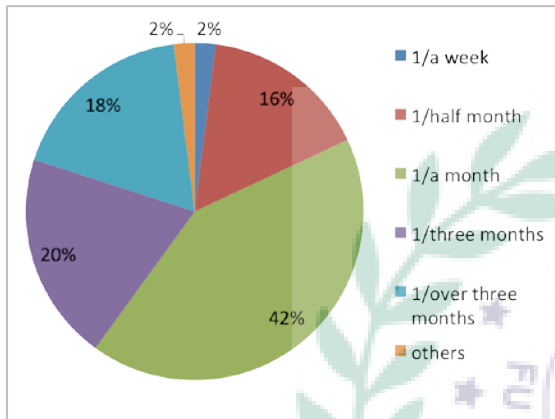


Fig. 2 What is the average frequency you go to Eslite Bookstore? (Regardless of branches)

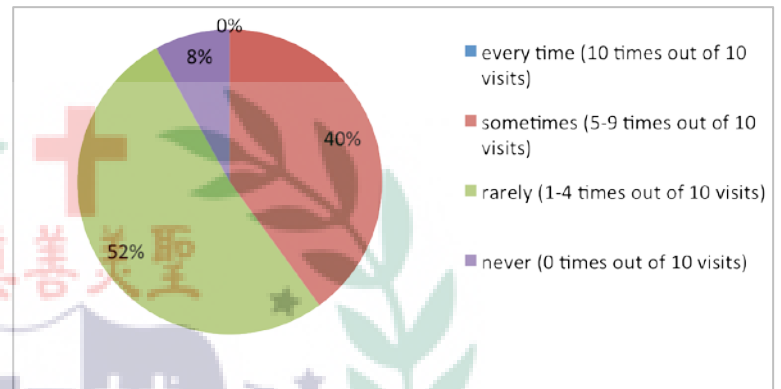


Fig. 3 When going to Eslite Bookstore, how often do you buy things there?

Fig. 2 indicates that 42% participants visit Eslite Bookstore once a month, while 20% of them only visit once within three months. As for Fig. 3, it shows that more than half of the participants rarely purchase any products when visiting Eslite Bookstore.

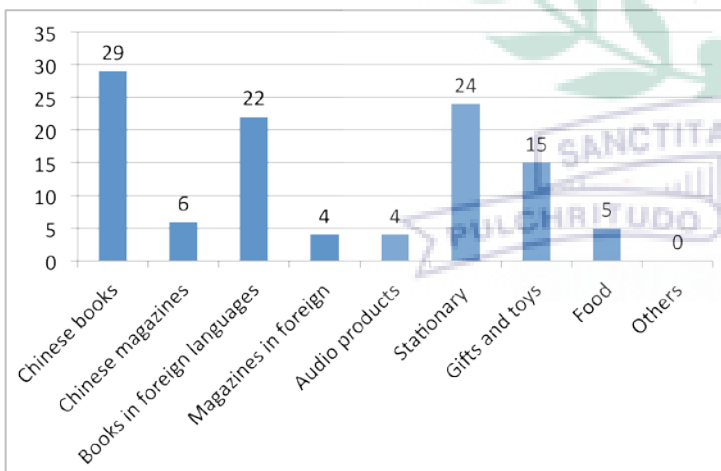


Fig. 4 What kind of products that you buy the most often at Eslite Bookstore? (Multiple choice)

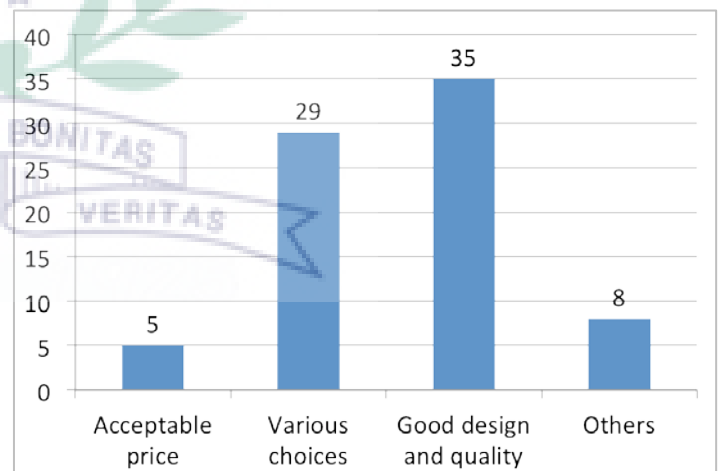


Fig. 5 Following the question above, what are the reasons buying things at Eslite Bookstore? (Multiple choice)

According to Fig. 4, the top three kinds of products participants bought the most at Eslite Bookstore are Chinese books, stationary, and books in foreign languages. And Fig. 5

presents that the main reason for participants to purchase at Eslite Bookstore is the good design and quality of the products.

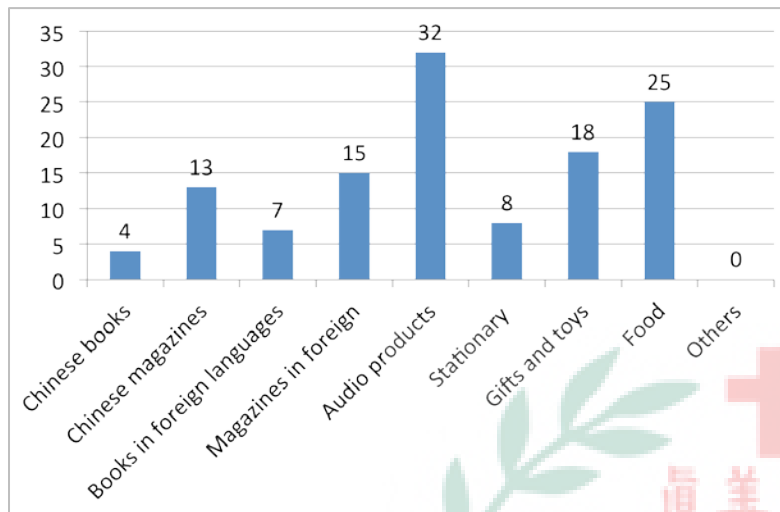


Fig. 6 What kind of products that you buy the LEAST at Eslite Bookstore? (Multiple choice)

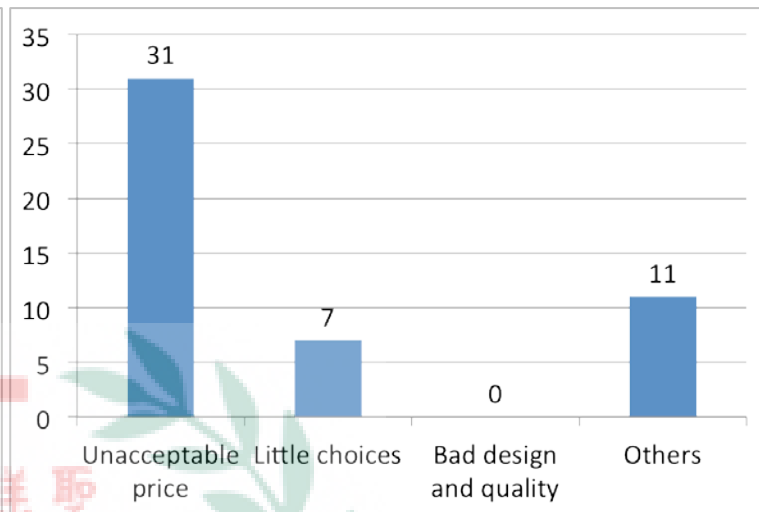


Fig. 7 Following the question above, what are the reasons you DON'T buy things at Eslite Bookstore? (Multiple choice)

Fig. 6 shows that the least two kinds of products participants bought at Eslite Bookstore are audio products and food. Fig. 7 points out that the main reason for participants not wanting to purchase products at Eslite Bookstore is the unacceptable price.

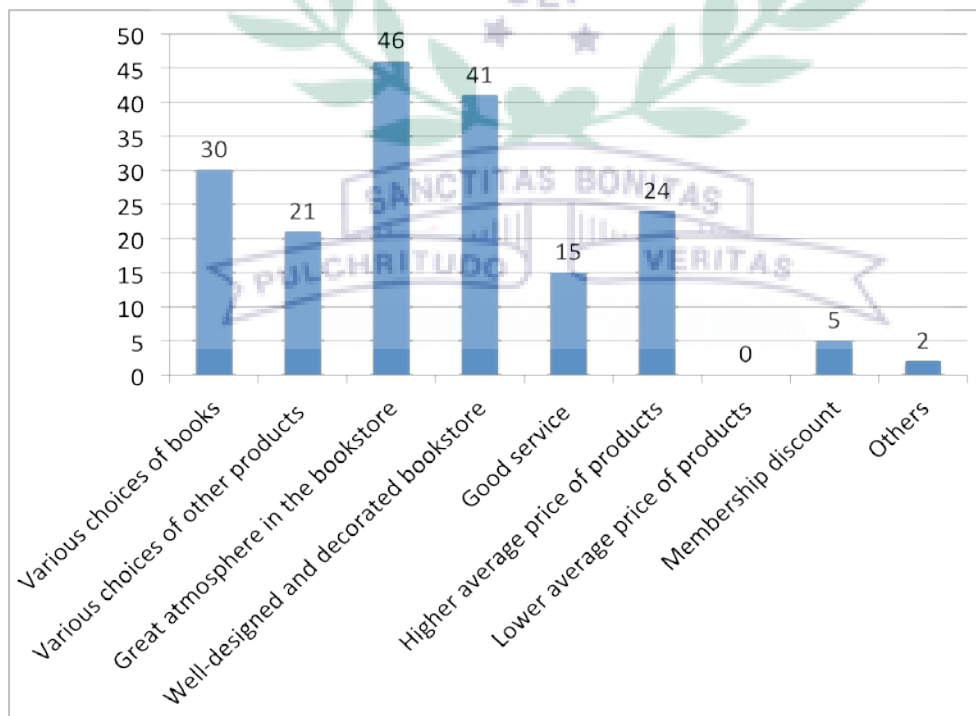


Fig. 8 What are the main elements you think that make Eslite Bookstore different from other chain bookstores in Taiwan? (Multiple choice)

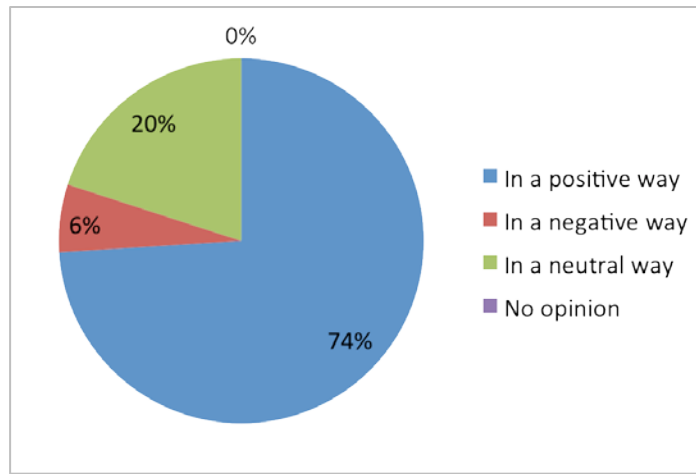


Fig. 9 Following the question above, how do the elements affect your thoughts about Eslite Bookstore?

According to Fig. 8, it points out that the top two reasons the participants thought that Eslite Bookstore was different from other chain bookstores in Taiwan are its the pleasant atmosphere, and the well-designed décor. On the other hand, Fig. 9 shows that more than 70% of the participants considered these features that differentiate Eslite Bookstore from other bookstores bring Eslite Bookstore a positive image to the public. In addition, the researcher later provided an open-ended question for participants to further explain what strengths Eslite Bookstore had that the other bookstores on campus didn't have. A few representative responses are listed below:

- Eslite Bookstore has more complete options on its products, especially on books.
- Eslite Bookstore's products have better quality.
- Eslite Bookstore has a better reading environment and atmosphere.

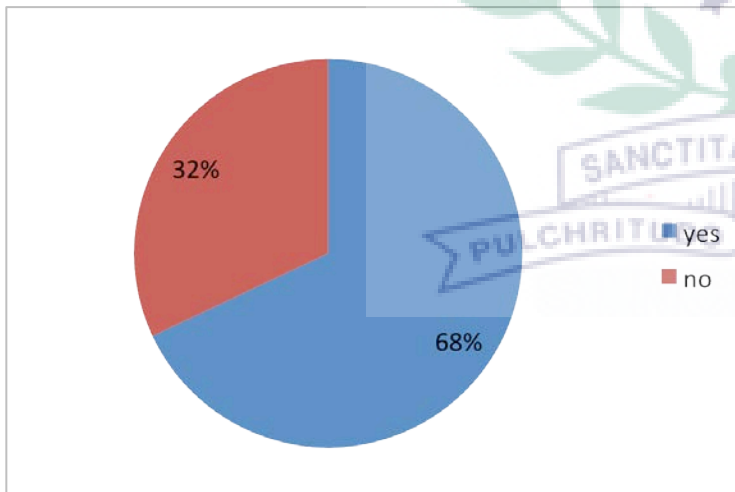


Fig. 10 Have you ever heard of the term “cultural commodification”?

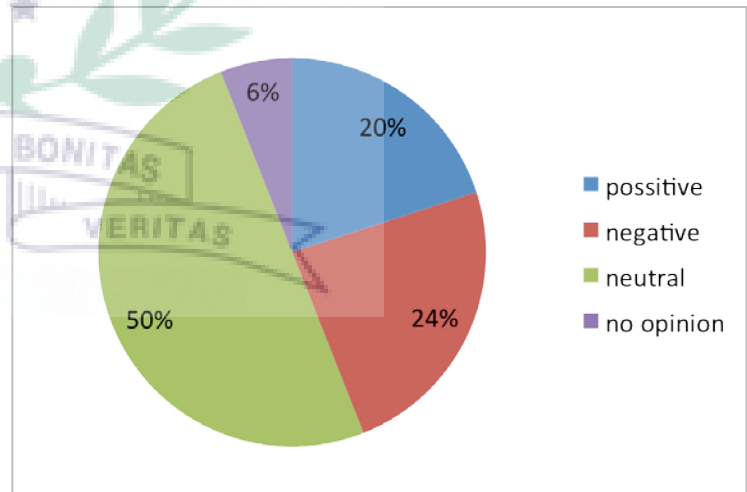


Fig. 11 Following the question above, in what way do you think of this term?

Fig. 10 indicates that about 70% of the participants heard of the “cultural commodification” strategy before they fill out this questionnaire. In addition, Fig. 11 points out that half of the participants considered this term as neutral, while 24% of them felt negative about it.

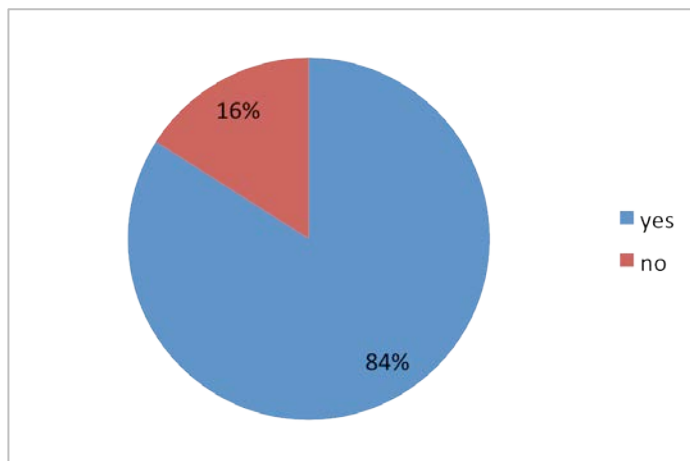


Fig. 12 Have you ever find Eslite Bookstore using this strategy?

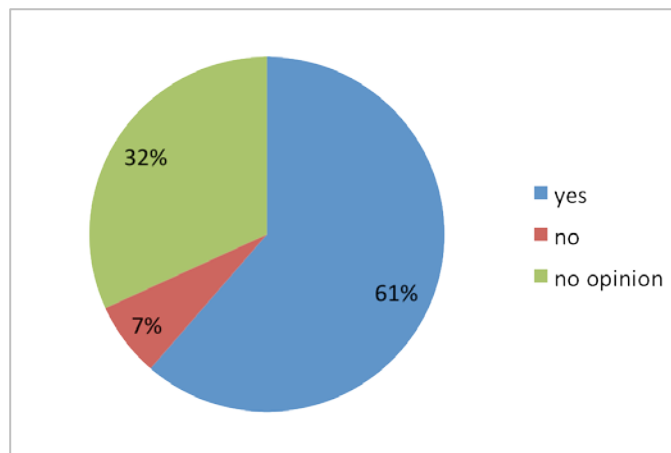


Fig. 13 Following the question above, do you think this strategy brings benefit to Eslite Bookstore?

According to Fig. 12, more than 80% of the participants have noticed that Eslite Bookstore used the cultural commodification strategy. As a follow-up of this question, the researcher provided an open-ended question for the respondents to answer their observation on this matter in details. A few representative responses are listed below:

- Eslite Bookstore uses this strategy on their interior design that brings out a pleasant atmosphere.
- Eslite Bookstore uses this strategy in their commercial and marketing slogans, which promote their “monthly theme” and related events and sale.
- Eslite Bookstore uses this strategy on the package of products, which is in retro style and combines it with the local Taiwanese culture elements.

As for Fig. 13, it presents that about 60% of the participants thought this strategy brings benefits to Eslite Bookstore, while 32% of them did not take a stand on whether it is beneficial or not and chose “no opinion.”

Besides survey, the researcher also designed three interview questions, which were extended from the questionnaire, and invited 5 interviewees from the same pool. The interview questions are listed below, including the findings that the researcher came up with.

- Interview question 1: According to the result of this study, half of the participants rarely purchase or never any products when visiting Eslite Bookstore. Do you think this is a phenomenon happening only at Eslite Bookstore, or commonly happening among all the bookstores in Taiwan?

Among 5 interviewees, 4 of them considered this a common phenomenon in Taiwan, which did not restricted at Eslite Bookstore. One of them said: “College student’s aim of

going to bookstore are basically the same: browse around, stay for a whole afternoon, and read free books.” On the other hand, one of the interviewees thought this not-buying-products phenomenon only happened at Eslite Bookstore. She answered: “I will buy books and stationary at other chain bookstores because they have more discount than Eslite Bookstore.”

- Interview question 2: If Eslite Bookstore wants to continuously grab the student’s attention, in what aspect does Eslite Bookstore has to improve or has to maintain?

Regarding to this question, 4 out of 5 interviewees replied “price” should be the primary aspect Eslite Bookstore should improve. They all suggested that most of the products at Eslite Bookstore were all relevantly expensive for undergraduate students, and it should provide more discount to the customers. While interestingly, one of the interviewee pointed out her thoughts on this price issue: “From my observation, Eslite Bookstore actually provided discount, but I think they have to emphasize more to let the public know since many people have certain ‘stereotype’ of Eslite Bookstore.” As for the aspect that the interviewees considered Eslite Bookstore should maintain, there were two most repeated answers from the interviewees, and the first one was Eslite Bookstore’s “good environment.” According to one of the interviewee, “student can enjoy their time in Eslite Bookstore without worrying about being driving away by the clerk.” The second aspect that in interviewees thought Eslite Bookstore should maintain was the “co-brand products and activities.” Three of the interviewees responded, “Eslite Bookstore did a good job on co-branding with popular illustrator and other companies, released many well-designed products that attract youngsters’ attention.”

- Interview question 3: According to the result of this study, 20% of the participants considered “cultural commodification” as a positive term. Yet when the survey went on to another question, 60% of the participants considered cultural commodification’s affect on Eslite Bookstore in a positive way. What do you think that caused the gap between these two data?

After understanding the interesting differences between the two data, interviewees expressed their thoughts toward it. There were 4 out of 5 interviewees mentioned youngsters’ general views on cultural commodification: “the word ‘commodification’ is quite negative,” said one of them. On the other hand, 2 of them also pointed out how Eslite Bookstore made cultural commodification more acceptable and appealing. One of the interviewees said, “Eslite Bookstore’s successful public image lets students think cultural commodification rather a good thing;” and another also mentioned: “Cultural commodification might not bring

direct benefit to the culture itself, yet through Eslite Bookstore, people can start to gain some knowledge of the culture through products.”

Besides students’ subjective responses in the interview and questionnaire, the researcher also examined relative articles and studies, finding some fundamental connections. Both responses from the questionnaire (fig. 8) and interview (question 2) show the great atmosphere and environment of Eslite Bookstore was its main attraction for the youngsters. According to the SWOT analysis in Chen’s paper “Taiwan’s Business Operation of Culture Products: A case Study of Eslite Bookstore,” two of Eslite Bookstore’s notable strengths were “its great public image and the excellent environment.” The statistics of this research paper thus correspond to the SWOT analysis. On the other hand, the statistics (fig. 7) and interview question (question 2) also point out that price was the major aspect that respondents dislike about Eslite Bookstore. This result again correlated with Chen’s SWOT analysis, which presented price as Eslite Bookstore’s weakness.

In the long run, the research confirms most FJU undergraduate students’ general opinions toward Eslite Bookstore were rather positive and supportive. In addition, Eslite Bookstore’s adoption of cultural commodification strategy was also successful from the youngsters’ perspective. If Eslite Bookstore is really going to start a branch on FJU campus and continuously using cultural commodification as a strategy, “it is important to maintain cultures in the form they ‘naturally’ evolve” (Pröschel) since youngsters were aware of the positive and negative effects of this strategy. As Eslite’s assistant manager of public relations, Yuh-hwa Lee once said, “each Eslite store has its own character.” Hence, it is also important for Eslite Bookstore to think highly of students’ opinions and needs since “each [Eslite Bookstore] is targeted at the readers who patronize it and matches the character of the area in which it is located” (Yang). As a successful bookstore, hopefully Eslite Bookstore could retain its strengths, and popularize the valuable culture heritage via books and products with the support from the young generation in Taiwan not only now, but also in the future.

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Appendix

Topic: What Are You Really Buying? FJU Students’ Opinions on Eslite Bookstore and its Adoption on Cultural Commodification Strategy

Questionnaire

Hello, this is a survey conducted by FJU English Department’s junior students, and designed only for FJU students to fill out. For your information, according to the news, there are possibilities for Eslite Bookstore to sign contrast with the school and open a branch on campus in the future. The result of the survey will remain anonymous. Thank you for your cooperation! Please feel free to raise questions or give comment via e-mail:

matilda1019@gmail.com Shirley Lee

Section 1: Personal background questions

1. What is your gender?

-Male

-Female

2. Which year are you in currently?

-Freshman

-Sophomore

-Junior

-Senior

-Above senior

3. Are you familiar with Eslite Bookstore?

-Yes (Please continue to the next question)

-No (This is the end of the survey. Thank you for your time.)

Section 2: Consumption patterns at Eslite Bookstore

4. What's the average frequency you go to Eslite Bookstore? (Regardless of branches)

- Once a week
- Once half month
- Once a month
- Once three months
- Once over three months
- Others: Explain how often _____

5. When going to Eslite Bookstore, how often do you buy things there?

- Every time (E.g. 10 times out of 10 visits)
- Usually (E.g. 6 to 9 times out of 10 visits)
- Sometimes (E.g. 3 to 5 times out of 10 visits)
- Rarely (E.g. 1 to 2 times out of 10 visits)
- Never (E.g. 0 times out of 10 visits)

6. What kind of products that you buy most often at Eslite Bookstore? (Multiple choice)

- Chinese book
- Chinese magazines
- Books in foreign languages
- Magazines in foreign languages
- Audio products (including CD and DVD)
- Stationary
- Gifts and toys
- Food
- Others _____

7. Following the question above, what are the reasons buying things at Eslite Bookstore? (Multiple choice)

- Acceptable price
- Various choices
- Good design and quality
- Others _____

8. What kind of products that you buy the least at Eslite Bookstore? (Multiple choice)

- Chinese book
- Chinese magazines
- Books in foreign languages
- Magazines in foreign languages

-Audio products (including CD and DVD)

-Stationary

-Gifts and toys

-Food

-Others _____

9. Following the question above, what are the reasons you buy things at Eslite Bookstore?

(Multiple choice)

-Unacceptable price

-Little choices

-Bad design and quality

-Others _____

Section 3: Comparison on features of Eslite Bookstore and other chain bookstores

10. What are the main elements you think that make Eslite Bookstore different from other chain bookstores in Taiwan? (Multiple choice)

-Various choices of books

-Various choices of other products (stationary, CD, DVD etc.)

-Great atmosphere in the bookstore

-Well-designed and decorated bookstore

-Good service

-Higher average price of products

-Lower average price of products

-Membership discount

-Others _____

11. Following the question above, how do the elements affect your thoughts about Eslite Bookstore?

-In a positive way

-In a negative way

-In a neutral way

-No opinion

Section 4: Opinions on cultural commodification

12. Comparing to the other two bookstores (Cave Bookstore and FJU Bookstore), what are the advantages you think Eslite Bookstores have if it really start to run a branch on campus?

Please describe in details: _____

13. Have you ever heard of the term “cultural commodification”?

-Yes

-No

14. Following the question above, in what way do you think of this term?

-In a positive way

-In a negative way

-In a neutral way

-No opinion

15. “Cultural commodification” is basically packaging culture for sale. Do you ever find Eslite Bookstore using this strategy?

16-Yes. Please describe how you find Eslite Bookstore uses it:

-No (This is the end of the survey. Thank you for your time.)

17 Following the question above, do you think this strategy brings benefit to Eslite Bookstore?

-Yes.

-No

-No comment

This is the end of the survey. Thank you again!

Interview Questions

- Interview question 1: According to the result of this study, half of the participants rarely purchase or never any products when visiting Eslite Bookstore. Do you think this is a phenomenon happening only at Eslite Bookstore, or commonly happening among all the bookstores in Taiwan?
- Interview question 2: If Eslite Bookstore wants to continuously grab the student’s attention, in what aspect does Eslite Bookstore have to improve or has to maintain?
- Interview question 3: According to the result of this study, 20% of the participants considered “cultural commodification” as a positive term. Yet when the survey went on to another question, 60% of the participants considered cultural commodification’s affect on Eslite Bookstore in a positive way. What do you think that caused the gap between these two data?