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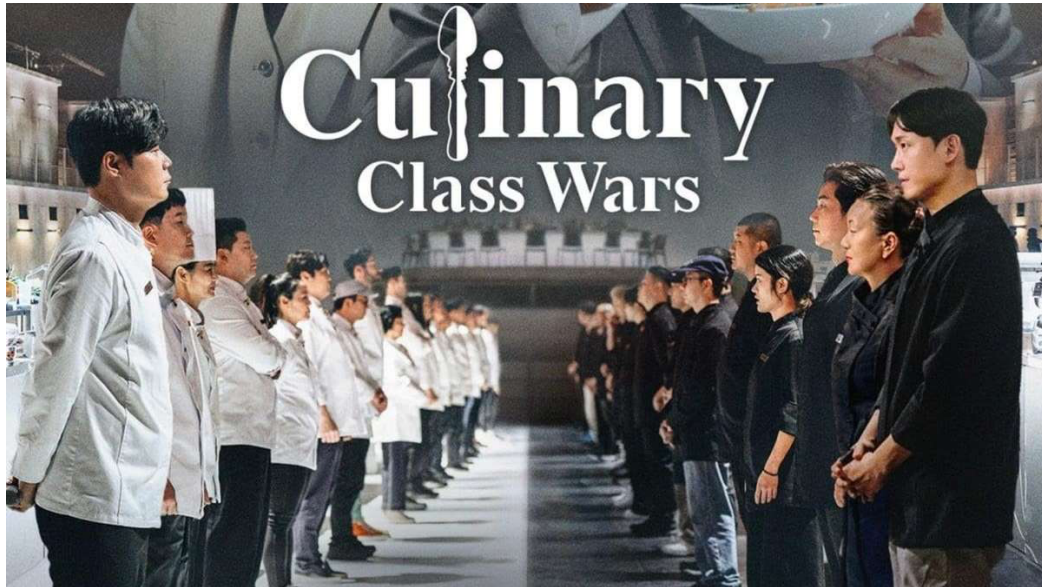
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The Power of Reality TV Through "Culinary Class Wars"

This essay examines the role of reality television in shaping society, particularly the ways in which such shows socialize viewers into accepting meritocratic ideals and how they influence our understanding and behaviour within competitive relationships, illustrated through the South Korean reality cooking competition "Culinary Class Wars". By analysing the program's structure, narrative techniques and portrayal of contestants' journeys, it reveals how reality television socializes viewers into accepting the meritocracy ideal of achieving success solely through individual effort, skill and determination. The essay also highlights the emphasis such shows have on prosocial behaviour and constructive deviance within competitive relationships as the key to collective success.

Drawing on relevant sociological theories, this essay contributes to the sociological discourse on media influence by underlining how reality television serves as a subtle yet powerful tool for shaping society and its cultural perceptions. Through the use of a case study, it provides a nuanced understanding of how dominant ideologies are repeatedly emphasised and socialized to viewers, bridging the gap between entertainment and sociology. This sheds light on the significance of media in everyday life and the capability it holds to shape social norms and behaviours.

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“Culinary Class Wars” — A South Korean culinary competition reality television show, featuring 100 chefs divided into 2 groups: the “White Spoon” chefs made up of recognized professionals such as Michelin Star chefs, and “Black Spoon” chefs comprising of less well-known, up-and-coming chefs from various backgrounds. Each episode of the series left me on edge with tension and suspense, eager to find out if the participants’ hard work paid off as the judges tasted and scored their dishes. At the same time, I felt a rush of ambition and competitiveness as I put myself in the shoes of the “Black Spoon” chefs, and imagined how I would perform should I have to prove my worth in similar challenges.

This prompted me to ponder on the sociology of reality television and the power it holds to shape society. Using “Culinary Class Wars” as a case study in this paper, I ask the following question — In what ways do reality television shows socialize viewers into accepting meritocratic ideals, and how do they influence our understanding and behaviour within competitive relationships?

Montemurro (2007) argues that reality television can influence audiences and their views on differences in unique ways as compared to scripted shows since viewers often relate more to the “ordinary” people they see on such shows. This can be explained through the symbolic interactionism theory whereby individuals interact with one another and create shared meanings through symbols, which in turn shapes human behaviour (Husin et al., 2021). By depicting everyday individuals engaged in shared symbols like teamwork and ambition in familiar social situations such as competition, viewers intuitively understand these symbols

and relate to them, forming an emotional connection which influences them to reproduce such behaviour.

As such, reality television can be viewed as powerful agents of socialization through shaping such symbols and interactions. It can also be seen as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) defined as institutions which spread and reinforce dominant ideologies (Lee, 2015). In the context of competition, meritocracy is often portrayed in reality television shows as a fair and equitable system in which success is solely the result of individual effort and ability.



“Culinary Class Wars” starts off showcasing a class divide between the White Spoons and the Black Spoons. White Spoons are addressed by their names, while Black Spoons can only go by their nicknames unless they “survive” till the finals. This divide reflects the prevailing social stratification based on position, wealth, and age in South Korea today (Aase, 2019). By initially framing the competition through this lens, the show taps into societal concerns about class and status. After the preliminary elimination of 60 Black Spoons, the show shifts focus to emphasize meritocracy, whereby chefs of both classes compete on a “level playing field” by working with the same themes and ingredients, and are judged solely based on skill and creativity. This transition reinforces the ideal of meritocracy, suggesting that anyone can rise to the top through individual effort, skill, and determination, regardless of their background.

However, not all South Koreans engage in such meritocracy ideal, especially when the country’s former president and minister were found guilty of misusing their authority to help

friends and family advance academically (The Economist, 2019). The same article highlights 2017 president elect Moon Jae-In's efforts towards meritocracy through drafting a legislation to criminalize the use of ghostwriters or consultants to enhance university applications, while current president Yoon Suk Yeol pledged to lead a presidency focused on meritocracy (The Economist, 2022).

“Culinary Class Wars” functions as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) through its structure and narrative, subtly reinforcing dominant societal beliefs about meritocracy and individual achievement emphasized in South Korea. The show repeatedly highlights that structural barriers such as differences in background, resources, and opportunities among the White Spoons and Black Spoons are negligible through its judging criteria. One such example would be the judges being blindfolded when tasting dishes, unaware of the chefs behind each dish. Furthermore, the final winner of the show is a Black Spoon chef, further promoting the ideology that success is universally attainable through individual hard work and socializes viewers into accepting these meritocracy beliefs.

Additionally, Goffman's concept of impression management, defined as an individual adjusting their social impressions based on a certain motive (Sage, n.d.) is central to how contestants present themselves on the show. Contestants carefully manage their on-screen personas to project traits like resilience and determination to align with societal expectations of achieving success through meritocracy, often portrayed through their individual interviews. This aligns with the concept of symbolic interactionism as viewers interpret and internalize these behaviours as relatable and aspirational. Together, these elements make “Culinary Class Wars” a tool for reinforcing meritocratic ideals.



As for competitive relationships, the repeated portrayal of constructive deviance shapes viewers' understanding of competitive relationships by highlighting how breaking norms can lead to positive outcomes in high-pressure environments. Constructive deviance refers to intentional actions that deviate from the norms of a group in a manner that is ethical and beneficial (Vadera, 2013). In the convenience food themed consolation round, many chefs whipped up flavourful mains using instant noodles. Deviating from this norm, Chef Kwon Sung-jun, nicknamed "Napoli Matfia" in the show took a risk and presented a tiramisu dessert that was well-received by the judges and managed to earn himself a place in the next competition round. As seen, acts of constructive deviance are framed in the show as essential for thriving in a competitive relationship, where standing out often requires pushing boundaries innovatively. The judges of the show also reinforce this by advancing contestants whose innovative actions align with the goals of the competition.

The portrayal of constructive deviance in the show reflects a broader trend in South Korea where there is growing emphasis placed on innovation and creative thinking. The country is prominently known to be one of the most innovative economies in the world, home to innovative and internationally competitive companies, such as Samsung, Hyundai, and LG (Soh, et al., 2023). It was also ranked 6th place in the Global Innovation Index 2024 (World Intellectual Property Organization, 2024). By showcasing constructive deviance behaviours with a particular emphasis on innovation and creativity, "Culinary Class Wars" can be seen as part of the broader narrative of South Korea's reputation for innovation. The nuanced portrayal of norm-challenging behaviour in the show resonates with a society striving to remain competitive in a rapidly changing world, socializing viewers into the need of strategic

and ethical risk-taking when engaged in competitive relationships to attain success, whereby they would be able to stand out from their competitors and be reinforced for such behaviour, just like the contestants in the show.



Prosocial relationships, defined as actions aimed at benefiting others, groups, or society (Li et al., 2023) are also highlighted as a key component of success in competitive environments as part of the show. The third round of the competition comprised of two team battles between the White Spoons and Black Spoons. In the first battle, the first group of Black Spoons displayed good teamwork under the leadership of “Triple Star”. The team members’ cooperativeness and compliance towards Triple Star’s role delegations eventually lead them to success. In contrary, the competing White Spoon team seemed to have too many differing opinions on cooking methods, resulting in their defeat. Similarly, in the second round, the group of White Spoons who chose to trust Chef Choi Hyun-seok’s decisions and instructions as the leader despite having doubts eventually won the battle against the second group of Black Spoons who developed conflicts due to poor teamwork and distrust. Through such portrayals, the show repeatedly emphasizes teamwork, mutual respect, and collaboration in working towards a common goal when engaged in competitive relationships even if it means making compromises, aligning with the framework of prosocial relationships. Clips of the judges commending groups that display strong collaboration and healthy group dynamics are also edited into the show which further reinforces this concept.

The above depictions of prosocial relationships also reflect the longstanding societal value of collectivism in South Korea. In the past, Korean militaristic governance emphasized *woori* (we), "one voice and one country," shaping a collectivist society influenced by Confucian values which not only structured its national education system and mandatory military service

but also the public and private sectors as reflected in workplaces with an emphasis on autocratic and group-focused leadership (Tan, 2015). Through repeated scenarios of prosocial relationships in action, “Culinary Class Wars” reiterate the importance of it as part of South Korea culture of collectivism, depicting how relationships based on respect, empathy, and collaboration can coexist with ambition and competition. This socializes viewers to value prosocial behaviours in their own lives, learning that building positive relationships can enhance personal and collective achievements, just as the groups who displayed good teamwork and even made sacrifices for the greater good of the team attained positive results.



However, not all reality television shows depict genuine happenings and “Culinary Class Wars” is no exception. Chef Kwon Sung-jun, who was crowned champion received backlash from Korean viewers who thought his seemingly overconfident remarks towards his competitor Chef Edward Lee during the confessional segments of the final episodes lacked courtesy, especially in Korean culture where respect for seniors is paramount (Ha, 2024). Kwon then took to Instagram to apologise for appearing arrogant in the show and revealed that most of his comments about his admiration for Chef Lee was edited out of the show, giving shape to his “arrogance” (Sukri, 2024).

This instance exemplifies Jean Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality, defined as “the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another, reproductive medium” (Wolny, 2017). In the context of reality television shows, some seemingly realistic scenes may be the result of heavy editing and dramatization to attract viewers’ attention, shaped into

a narrative that feels authentic but is actually carefully constructed to entertain. Such presentations blur the lines between constructed narratives and real-world dynamics, increasing the likelihood of viewers internalizing these dramatized depictions which influences their understanding and behaviours. Unable to fully distinguish dramatized portrayals from reality, viewers adopt lessons on meritocracy, constructive deviance and prosocial relationships from “Culinary Class Wars” as part of their cultural toolkit, believing that such values would lead them to success, just like the contestants on the show. They would then construct strategies based on those beliefs and apply such frameworks in reality, often overlooking the complexities and unpredictable factors in society that exist outside the screen, depicting the great power and influence reality television shows hold to shape society.



My experience of watching “Culinary Class Wars” is one that is different from those of other reality television shows, as I focused on the sociology behind such shows as much as I enjoyed the entertainment value it provided me with. The above suggests that reality television shows are powerful agents of socialization that utilize shared symbols and interactions such as ambition and teamwork in familiar social situations like competitive environments, leading to an emotional connection built on relatability, influencing the reproduction of similar behaviours. This can also be understood through the lens of an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) as dominant ideologies are reinforced.

To summarize my answer to the inquiry “In what ways do reality television shows socialize viewers into accepting meritocratic ideals, and how do they influence our understanding and behaviour within competitive relationships?”, the show reinforces the

universal meritocracy ideal through its portrayal of competition as a fair and level playing field, where individual effort is the primary driver of success. This can be observed through the same judging criteria both classes of chefs are graded upon and the emerging champion being a less well-known Black Spoon chef. In terms of competitive relationships, constructive deviance of strategic and ethical risk taking and establishing prosocial relationships through teamwork and compromising for the greater good of the team appear to be the main ideologies “Culinary Class Wars” hope to reiterate. Chefs who utilize their creativity to stand out from their competitors such as cooking desserts instead of mains are met with compliments and advancements to the next stage of the competition, aligning with the broader ideology of innovation to attain success. Similarly, in group battles, teams who display effort toward building a healthy group dynamic such as having trust in the leader and adhering to his or her instructions are rewarded with successful wins, reflecting the culture of collectivism in the country.

However, reality television shows are ultimately produced to entertain audiences. Thus, it might utilize heavy editing and dramatization which may in turn alter reality but is presented in a seemingly authentic narrative. This blurs the line between real-world dynamics and constructed realities, explained through the concept of hyperreality, demonstrating how easily viewers incorporate these learnt values they are socialized into inside their cultural toolkit, and display this influence through applying it in reality.

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