“Capitalism of the Senses: Food Business and the Creation of Modern Visual Culture”
Ai Hisano, Kyoto University

Abstract

Businesses shape our sensory experiences of the world. In the late nineteenth century food manufacturers, flavorists, and perfumers in the United States and elsewhere, began experimenting with new technologies to measure, define, and standardize something seemingly personal and intangible—the senses. Color played a key role in this new sensory world of business. The development of less expensive, chemically-synthesized dyes made possible not only economies of scale, but also ever-increasing varieties in color. By the 1930s, color had penetrated all facets of modern life, from automobiles, to street signs, advertisements, textiles, and even foods. The rise of corporate investment in managing the senses provides a powerful new lens to understand the evolution of capitalism in this era.

This paper explores the use of color as a key driver of demand in the United States food industry between the late nineteenth century and the 1930s. It focuses on the role of color scientists and color consultants, specifically the General Electric physicist Matthew Luckiesh and consultants Faber Birren and Howard Ketcham, in constructing new visual environments in the food business. As science and industry began to converge at an unprecedented level, the use of color became a crucial source of competitive advantage. Scientists provided tools to determine and standardize the color of foods, such as color measuring equipment; while color consultants promulgated a vision of how food should look and helped food processors capitalize on color. This new visuality was not only more colorful than before but also mass-produced, standardized, and rationalized. As a result, research and control of color became a central and
permanent part of food production and marketing strategies.

The historical aspect of sensory experiences is an unconventional topic in business history literature. Yet studies on the senses help us understand how seemingly personal matter that many people take for granted are embedded in broader political, economic, and social contexts, and how business played an important role in this process. Like the two other papers in this session, this paper demonstrates the broad implications of business practices for society and people outside the business. Unless we start thinking out of the box, business history would remain confined to the margins of scholarship. It is important to explore not only how a managerial structure changed or how a firm developed business strategies, or talk in vague generalizations about “capitalism,” but also, for example, why marketing strategies of firms matter in the big picture of human history, and how changes inside global enterprises influenced society at large. It is time to revisit why business matters as a subject of academic study and as an actor in history.