

An evaluative report on the project:

News Food: the Unfortune Cookies

A major action research project of the course of **MA Applied Imagination in the Creative Industries (MAAI) in Central Saint Martins, UAL**

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1. Introduction

How can discursive food design ignite cross-disciplinary creative collaborations by drawing connections from the shared experience in the post-pandemic?

This action research study is about exploring the use of discursive edible design in connecting creative practitioners to audiences across a variety of disciplines in the context of the post-pandemic. In this context, individuals have been disconnected from each other physically and emotionally for a period and have been reconnecting after the COVID-19 isolation.

2. Background

The study was enabled through several assumptions and supported by several research insights. The assumptions were that contributing to solving the issue of disciplinary disconnection in the post-pandemic is crucial, which was a practically achievable goal within the project time frame. In addition, the project assumed that a mutual awareness across individuals' practices and interdisciplinary connections are the initial steps for cross-disciplinary creative collaborations. Research insight from behavioural psychology supported this study: that shared yet novel experiences between individuals can be used to extend interpersonal connections (Aaron A. et al. 2013). Therefore, the action research intervention used the pandemic experience, as a shared novel experience, to make interpersonal connections. Research insight on multidisciplinary collaboration and the interdisciplinary approach also supported this study, in which this approach is crucial in tackling complex contemporary world challenges (L.R. Bronstein 2003). Moreover, the project considered that sensory experience positively influences communication and information processing (B. E. Stein 2002). Therefore, this study focused on using discursive edible design, as sensory experience, for interdisciplinary awareness and connection as a starting spark of creative collaboration. The study project attempts to achieve such results by drawing interpersonal connections from the shared experience in the post-pandemic.

The intervention of this project positioned itself with edible products themed around "News Food" within the timeframe of MAAI. In addition, the intervention was as a local (Hong Kong) project with online and offline engagement in terms of both virtual content dissemination and tangible, edible content making and sharing.

3. Methodology

A variety of literature reviews on discursive design, food design and communication was conducted in the research process. The outcome intervention was significantly influenced by secondary research on behavioural psychology by Aron et al. (2013), which tested the creation of interpersonal connection by giving 36 questions to pairs of strangers. The study revealed that understanding and sharing a novel experience forged connections between these strangers, and the social bonding has a positive correlation for the shared experience being more novel and challenging.

The action research process deployed primary and secondary research methods, with primary research being: 1. a questionnaire involving around 20 creative practitioners on their situation during the pandemic; 2. One-on-one interviews with 10+ creative practitioners, for more than 45 minutes, including studio visits; 3. Edible material (baking) experiment.

In addition, the study deployed qualitative and quantitative research methods, with the intervention as explorative research. For example, using a questionnaire with open-ended questions at the initial stage of action research provided initial feedback on the intervention. Furthermore, quantitative and qualitative data were in another online survey on the final product of the intervention: News Food: the Unfortune Cookies. The intervention product will be explained in the next section.

4. External testing and Intervention:

The action research process begins with defining the “What-Why-How-What If” statement of the project and followed by the early intervention of an edible teaser experience; external feedback from the first online survey on the experience of creative practitioners in the pandemic shaped the idea of “News Food: the Unfortune Cookies” with three versions of interventions: 1. the trial phase; 2. the client project with the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, School of Design (HKPU-SD); and 3. the final edible product and dissemination of News Food: the Unfortune Cookies. The interventions were visually recorded.

The interventions - News Food: the Unfortune cookie (Image 1)

The launch of the three versions of interventions each requires design and distribution of edibles transforming information from creative practitioners: their work and situation in the post-pandemic, as such highlight their mutual experience to foster mutual understanding across creative and other disciplines. Through that the project attempts to create cross-disciplinary connections for the initial spark of interdisciplinary collaborations.

The name of the intervention series: “News Food”, refers to discursive edible design that transforms and distributes real-life events and stories as edible pieces.

The name of News Food: the Unfortune Cookies refers to the connection between individuals who shared the same unfortunate situation of COVID-19; this naming contrasts

the fortune cookies that embeds the message of luck. Each package of News Food: Unfortune Cookies contains several variations that each represents a response from one independent creative practitioner on his/her experience with the pandemic. By sharing the cookies with other individuals of different professions in the post-pandemic, views and emotions towards such a tough, yet novel time of the pandemic were distributed, thus making connections across disciplines.



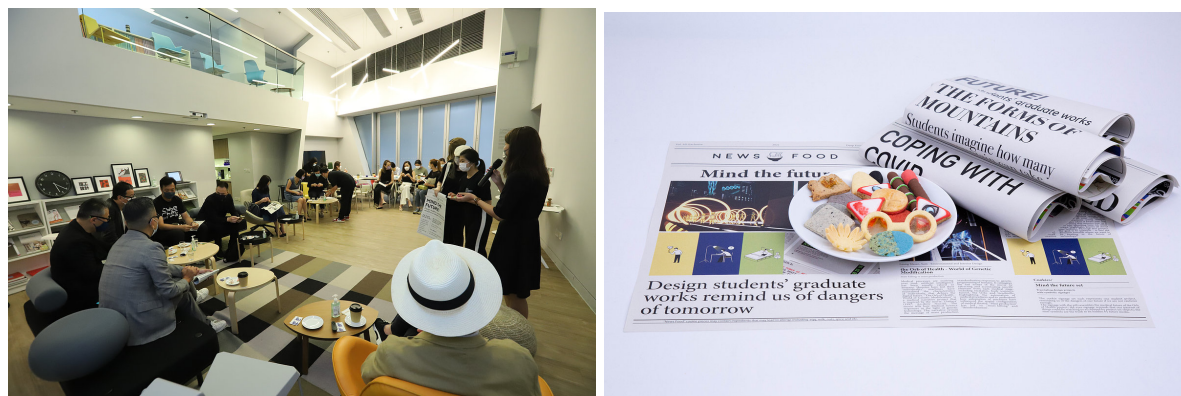
(Image 1: News Food: The Unfortune Cookies main visual image)

The first intervention (Image 2 and 3) involved bringing the trial version of the Unfortune Cookies, as the first volume of News Food, to 10 creative practitioners from different creative disciplines. The participants were invited through online search and outreach. Feedback from these participants in verbal and face-to-face exchanges provided initial external validations on the intervention and informed the need to enrich content in the next intervention.



(Image 2 and 3: Package of the trial version of the Unfortune Cookies and the edible trial pieces)

The second intervention (Image 4 and 5) involved designing another set of edibles, another volume of News Food, that features cookies, each inspired by one graduate design project at the HKPU-SD annual show. This intervention acted as an internal validation from the creative industry insiders as the corresponding event had engaged 40+ professionals in the creative industry at industry gatherings about emerging creative professionals. Again, feedback was collected as verbal review through project debriefing with the SD marketing team and professionals of the creative industry.



(Image 4 and 5: Tea gathering event photo and the second set of edibles)

The third intervention (Image 6 - 8) involved designing, producing and distributing a refined and batch produced set of the Unfortune Cookies with two mini-magazines that contained articles on stories of the ten interviewed creatives. The study provides the cookies to audiences interested in connecting with the featured creative practitioners. By collecting responses from creatives on their experience during the unfortunate pandemic and transforming their feedback into the format of edibles, the intervention used discursive edible design as a platform of exchange and connection across creative disciplines. The intervention has connected creative practitioners by highlighting the mutual experience of the challenging pandemic and the challenge of being a creative individual in this challenging time of COVID-19. The study has given the Unfortune Cookies to a group of pilot user-eaters, 15 individuals from different professions, and the interviewed creative practitioners, alongside a questionnaire for feedback. Moreover, written and verbal responses were collected in a free-flow format as the interviewed creative practitioners received the Unfortune Cookies. Social media launch of the final zine and images/content of the cookies invited online audiences to give feedback in questionnaires.



(on the left: Image 6: Content inside the Unfortune Cookies zine print-out)
(on the right: image 7: the edible outcomes of the Unfortune Cookies)



(Image 8: News Food: the Unfortune Cookies zines and edibles)

5. Reflection

(full process on blog post no. 36-47 via: <https://www.deepfooddesign.com/learning-log>)

The process of action research has been providing myself with insight on the subject of Applied Imagination as a process. I have gained most significantly clarity on action research intervention as a cyclical process, personal determination to trust the process throughout the project, and development of an ability to reflect on and evaluate action research as the project proceeds.

I have gained a clear concept on action research and intervention as a cyclical process which I found essential and beneficial to my project. Such a concept includes knowledge and practice on steps of the process, which flows from an uncertain and divergent start to a clear and converging end and continues by looping this cycle. The process has invited me to extend from the comfort zone to overcome the fear zone and acquire new knowledge from within the learning zone and growth zone throughout stages of the project. (for details, refer to blog post no. 44)

I have gained confidence in the research process which was crucial throughout the project. A massive amount of uncertainty was experienced at the start of my research journey. Through such conditions, I realised the importance of being consistent and determined with a sincere research intention. In a practical sense, I realised that trust and respect on each steps of the creative process being a decision under project vision by far was essential to create an accountable outcome of an action research intervention. (for details, refer to blog post no. 45)

The project has stretched my ability to reflect on and evaluate the action research for both the project of the action research and on the subject of action research itself. The process has given me insights into the multiple ways and approaches to evaluate a research project, from qualitative to quantitative analysis in terms of feedback collection and from thematic to meta-analysis in terms of project evaluation. In the notion of action research itself, the process has given me new insights on the boundaries and possibilities of building new knowledge from practising action research. (for details, refer to blog post no. 46)

6. Conclusion

To conclude, by deploying various research methodologies, this action research project creates new knowledge on the cyclical intervention process for me. I found that such a cyclical action research process is essential to initiate, develop, co-create and evaluate a creative project that aims at making a socio-cultural impact. In particular to this project, discursive food design is explored as a method and a medium to create a connection between creatives to initiate further cross-disciplinary collaboration. It is hoped that the method and the extended use of discursive edible design will be further explored in the future. (for details, refer to blog post no. 47)

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Reflective Journal Link:

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