

# History Journal Analysis

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HIST201

Assignment #4

For this assignment, I chose to focus on an article about Monosodium Glutamate, or “MSG” titled, “A Short History of MSG: Good Science, Bad Science, and Taste Cultures” by Jordan Sand. For a short journal of eleven pages, Mr. Sand elaborates on a fitting amount of facts and figures to complete his thoughts and convey an engaging history of the use of MSG. Among the stated facts and figures, Mr. Sand explains the MSG phenomenon by way of recognizing various cultural differences between nations and their dietary and cultural histories, general chemistry facts, the use of simple economic knowledge, and general marketing concepts which leads into psychology. In this journal, Mr. Sand uses effective footnotes and references to the literature that was used to complete his own research as well. This journal was assembled in an understandable format that made the reader free to enjoy its contents.

Firstly, since the topic of the journal is about MSG, one must know what it is in the first place. Thankfully, Mr. Sand doesn’t use gratuitous chemistry nomenclature to do this. In his introductory paragraph, he goes on to explain it simply by telling the reader the substance’s chemical name and its abbreviation. Since this is a common, well-known, and often controversial substance, his introductory paragraph does it a satisfactory preface. As stated by the author, “You may not know any organic chemistry, but you can probably rattle off the name of the compound: monosodium glutamate. And chances are you know that it is associated with a set of adverse physiological symptoms sometimes called “Chinese Restaurant Syndrome...” the topic is not overly technical for the layperson to understand. There are further mentions regarding MSG’s chemical properties later in the article regarding why it became controversial. Mr. Sand uses the concept of chemistry (assumably without a background in the subject) to highlight how its creator and various peoples of Asian and North American markets have historically viewed MSG as well, which ties into marketing and psychology section later in this report. A “short and sweet” example of Mr. Sand’s explanation of MSG is a much appreciated one, simply saying that “...chemist Ikeda Kikunae’s isolation of the ingredient in sea kelp...” is the where the substance comes from.

A rather large portion of this journal is dedicated to the historical marketing tactics in various nations by Ajinomoto, the brand name of MSG from Japan. Mr. Sand’s journal states that “Ajinomoto began building its domestic market in the final years of the Meiji era (1868–1912), when Japan was rapidly developing its industries to join the club of the Western powers.” After reading this entry, the reader is educated about the roots of the Ajinomoto brand conception, the general feeling in Japanese culture in the mid 1860’s, and the notion of the Japanese wishing to keep up with the implied high-ranking socio-economic status of “The Western Powers”. A point of interest in this journal is the ever-present controversy around MSG. There’s a particularly useful footnote for anyone who wishes to read more for themselves, stating that, “A substantial bibliography of the medical literature on msg is available at the Web site of Truth in Labeling, an organization campaigning against msg ([www.truthinlabeling.org/o-u-reactionsReferences.html](http://www.truthinlabeling.org/o-u-reactionsReferences.html)).” Of course, this is a biased source which leads one to read about why they should *not* consume MSG, but this footnote can nonetheless facilitate one’s own critical thinking and informed opinions about the subject.

In the aforementioned footnote, the latter half of the entry starts evolving into the psychological facets of the famous MSG. As Mr. Sand states, “It is interesting to note Kwok, whose name suggests he is a southerner, singled out northern Chinese restaurants for criticism. This distinction, perhaps an unconscious expression of regional nationalism, went unnoticed by non-Chinese Americans, few of whom knew whether the Chinese cuisine they were eating was from the north or the south.” As evidenced in this quote, the author is obviously aware of the

psychology behind the controversy of MSG. By pointing out that as a southern Chinese person, Mr. Kwok may have nationalistic biases against northern Chinese people, Mr. Sand inspires one to examine their own biases and think critically about the subject. Another footnote gives a good example of how north Americans may have generally regarded MSG as well in that MSG is “the mysterious ‘white powder’ of the Orient...”. This old-fashioned wording could connote for some that MSG is from a foreign and untrustworthy place, or to others an exotic and exciting ingredient. In this journal once again, Mr. Sand’s writing and research technique transmits information that transcends the very text that it is composed of.

The format of this journal is an increasingly familiar one. If one were to ever attend college or partake in any kind of historical research, it would most likely have been necessary to use the Chicago style for documentation. Like any other Chicago style essay, while reading this journal, the reader has a choice when encountering a footnote number within the text. For the curious reader with a sharp memory, diverting to the footnote before finishing the body of any given text in the main body is an instant elaboration on the material. This means that now in the age of computers, one should not have resort to their favorite search engine in order to gain a better understanding of the topic at hand. This journal provides easy access to other texts and considerations about the topic of MSG in the citations and footnote section. For other readers who wish to wait until the entire journal has been consumed, a rather intricate and effective reflection period is afforded in the footnotes. Unlike other citation styles, the Chicago style of this journal gives the reader a choice to read details as they go, or they may save the footnotes until the end. In general, the journal’s formatting is straightforward and uncrowded.

This journal by Mr. Sand was a well-rounded and unpretentious method of documenting his research of MSG. When reading research journals, one may expect to run into hyper inflated technical jargon and tedious facts and statistics, but that was not the case here. The plethora of information given about a likely uninteresting topic was delivered expertly by the author and is worthy of using as an example for future works. Mr. Sand provides just enough information in both the body and citations of the text to effectively retain interest and inspire further investigation by the reader.

## Bibliography

Sand, Jordan. "A Short History of MSG: Good Science, Bad Science, and Taste Cultures." *Gastronomica* 5, no. 4 (2005): 38-49, accessed February 15, 2019. doi:10.1525/gfc.2005.5.4.38. DOI: 10.1525/gfc.2005.5.4.38