Dessert: Heavenly Or Sinful? Consumption, Carnality and Spirituality in Food Advertising

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ABSTRACT
Food as a commodity does not solely represent nourishment; it conveys cultural and social values that are consumed by the self and transferred to denote the self. This paper examines the dimensions of a particular type of food and its complex representational associations with sexuality and femininity, first by considering the historical lineage of its cultural importance and then by conducting a content analysis of its representation in modern advertising. Understanding the fascination in connections between food and sex provides a creative and potentially informative way of exploring, experiencing and developing our humanity.

INTRODUCTION
All people share an intimate connection with food as a physical necessity: “Food is a metonym of the mortality of human flesh, the inevitable entropy of living matter” (Lupton 1996, 3). As such, it is a source of great ambivalence, necessary for survival, part of human enjoyment and connection, but also a source of threat, of contamination, of prejudice (Hirschman et al. 2004; Luomala, Laaksonen, and Leipämäa 2004) with frequently strong gendered connotations (Belk and Costa 1998; Fischer 2000). The experience of food around the world, in various cultures, countries, regions, families, and even as it is experienced on an individual level, is extraordinary in its ability to denote diversity and promote unity. In postmodern analysis of advertisements, food has been called “the product category that is at once the most mundane and the most sublime” (Fischer 2000, 288). This paper explores ways in which food is depicted in advertising as a vehicle of socialization and individual gratification. Specifically, this paper considers the role of dessert as an analogy for sexual indulgence, as depicted in American advertising, and its effect on concepts of femininity and womanhood, first by exploring previous research and theory on the correlation of sweet foods and sex, and then by turning directly to advertising texts through an analysis of magazine ads.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SWEETS: HEDONISM AND MODESTY
Food’s influence on carnal and spiritual experience has been long celebrated and its links to emotion explored. The Greeks and Romans turned to various fruits and exotic dishes to stimulate sexual pleasures, an approach that has stood the test of time (Painter 2007) and is even celebrated in commercially-sponsored rituals. In the Bible, the fall of man was over an apple and consumption of bread and wine in the ritual of Communion is the literal or figurative consumption of the body and blood of Christ. In both carnal and spiritual consumption situations and across time, different foods carry different meanings. Chocolate, in particular, has a rich history—in Mesoamerica it was the treat of elite men; as early as the 1500s it was consumed for its aphrodisiac effects, and soon became associated with the female appetite; and in the 1600s it was even used in dowry (Belk and Costa 1998). Even after its democratization through mass production, it has retained its category as a luxury and emotive product. This association has become so internalized in discourse that recent research has even used chocolate as the affective stimulus to test affect and cognition in consumer decision making (Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999). Additionally, studies have demonstrated that sweets tend to be craved during experiences of negative affect, and linked to higher consumption in Anglo-Saxons through a life philosophy that stresses functionality and restraint (LeBel, Lu, and Dube 2006).

Desserts have a rich history in American culture and have become a vital part of a booming commercial food industry. But desserts that are found at the table also can be representative of more intricate social processes that participate in defining social identity or can be representative of deep-seated social and personal tensions associated with indulgence and restraint. The aphorism that you are what you eat “is a provocative distortion of the more palatable claim of the nineteenth-century French gourmet Brillat-Savarin: ‘Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are.’ Brillat-Savarin was making a claim for social status; we now interpret his words to denote social understanding” (Twitchell 1999, 211). In other words, food as a commodity does not solely represent nourishment; it conveys cultural and social values that are consumed by the self and transferred to denote the self.

In her book Food, the Body and the Self, Deborah Lupton explores food as physical and as subjective, considering “the links between the overtly ‘practical’ phenomena of food, eating and cooking, and the more apparently ‘abstract’ and ‘sociological’ phenomena of subjectivity, emotion, memory and acculturation” (Lupton 1996, 3). Food is not simply about fueling bodies or enjoying gustatory sensations. It is central to the experience of embodiment, a sense of self, and subjectivity (Lupton 1996). Other researchers have proposed that food may even be the natural link to understanding sexuality, gender and power—and indeed, livelihood. Elspeth Probyn sought to “use the materiality of eating, sex and bodies in order to draw out alternative ways of thinking about an ethics of existence, ways of living informed by both the rawness of a visceral engagement with the world, and a sense of restraint in the face of excess… Eating, of course, is intimately involved with bodies, and in fact can question what we think we know of the body” (Probyn 2000, 3). Food, it seems, is integral to the construction of the self and social experience.

These views are presented to offer examples of the profundity of meaning and thought that has gone and goes into food. This paper further addresses these points as they inform the discussion of advertising for dessert products and the use of sexuality; in particular, it considers visual and verbal forms of communicating sexuality and the implications of these methods, which will then be used to discuss the construction of femininity through sexuality and food. Finally, various advertisements are examined in order to exemplify how visual and verbal communications convey a nexus of food and sexuality, specifically as they relate to dessert foods. The works previously cited will be called upon to discuss the constructed meaning of these themes.

ADVERTISING AND VISUAL EXPERIENCE OF DESSERT
In addition to social identity, images of desserts insinuate that such foods can serve a more personal service, as providing solace during heartache; more fundamentally, these images participate in self-definition. Dessert and images of it, in other words, are multidimensional and multi-purpose. While many of the social and personal features that various desserts serve are a direct result of their physical contents, many of those features are also intertwined
in advertising images that incorporate ritual histories (Otnes and Scott 1996), denote contemporaneous ideologies (Fischer 2000), or attempt to create a new image and place for the product through advertising. The created image is perhaps the most powerful, immediate source of information about what is and what matters. In advertising, knowledge (or presumed knowledge) of consumers’ lives is used in constructing images (Bordo 1993). Much of what is learned of food in advertising is presented through visual representation; the other senses (except sound in broadcast media) involved in food consumption, though they may be aroused by visual encounters, are not experienced in the primary sense through media. Thus, exploring the aspects of visual representation that are relevant to food and sexuality in advertising should prove helpful.

Paul Messaris outlines three situations in which visual claims take the place of unacceptable verbal forms when promoting some association with sex (Messaris 1997). First, visual claims are often employed when sex is being used metaphorically and the advertisement is really promising something else; second, visual claims are used when the link between the product and sex is not well received; and third, visual claims replace verbal claims when the type of sex communicated is not socially acceptable. Susan Bordo (1993) suggests when women are positively portrayed with insatiable appetites; these images are used solely metaphorically to imply sexual appetite. According to Messaris, the kind of meaning that cannot be expressed in words, such as the implication that experiencing the food product is equivalent to sex, is expressed metaphorically. The metaphor is used to connect food and sex, but “literal sex and orgasms are not what these ads are really selling” (Messaris 1997, 247). However, food is not always a metaphor for sex, but rather sometimes is depicted as being an erotic experience in and of itself. Some advertising may construct “food as a sexual object of desire, and eating is legitimated as much more than a purely nutritive activity. Rather, food is supposed to supply sensual delight and succor...” (Bordo 1993, 112).

In addition to considering the elements of visual metaphor, Paul Messaris proposes a more fundamental connection between pictorial imagery and real-world experience, suggesting that while visual imagery often may be likened to language in its ability to communicate, it in fact is quite different. Barring a few exceptions such as onomatopoeia, language is an arbitrary system of representation. In contrast, visual imagery is communicated and understood through its likeness or unlikeness to reality. In other words, people interpret imagery by using learned experiences with light, color, shape and other means of determining real-world vision to formulate an integrated image of the world (Messaris 1997). If we are to accept his theory, the potential of visual communication, and in particular of advertising equating food and sex, is incredible for the implication that the pictures encountered in such ads are interpreted through relationships with and understanding of reality. In fact, the visual aspects are integral to the theorizing of food as commodity and advertising’s role and effects in creating food images (Lupton 1996).

However, the current emphasis on visual device should not undermine the role of language and discourse in the experience of food and sexuality. While language and discourse may not be necessary in the carnal experience of food, “language and discourse are integral to the meanings we construct around food—how we interpret and convey to others our sensual experiences in preparing, touching and eating food—which in turn shape our sensual responses” (Lupton 1996, 13). Discourses about verbal and visual, as well as other sensual, communicative methods for food and sex are historically and culturally rooted.

**GENDER AND DISCOURSES OF RESTRAINT**

Since medieval times, major shifts have occurred in cultural expectations about the control of the self. In modern times, “there are a plethora of unarticulated and overt regulations around the importance of the ‘civilized’ body; that is, the body that is tightly contained, consciously managed, subject to continual self-surveillance as well as surveillance on the part of others” (Lupton 1996, 22). Contemporary cultural meanings and expectations around food and eating practices have been shaped and reproduced via these understandings of the notion of the ‘civilized’ body and tend to be directed towards women. While the constraints over eating originally were based on a concern over appearing delicate and avoiding vulgarity rather than concerns for the shape and size of the body, these constraints over eating were slowly internalized (Lupton 1996, 21) and continued as the mainstay as idealized body images changed.

The ability to abstain, to constrain oneself in eating, is viewed by some as a form of power (Probyn 2000). Advertisers are aware of the ways in which women’s lives seem out of control and, in particular, of the poles of eating disorders and food obsessions; they incorporate these obsessions into their pitches (Bordo 1993, 105). Ironically, in study after study, men have tended to find curvaceous women more attractive, pointing to what may seem like a vast miscalculation on the part of advertisers. However, Messaris argues that in situations in which the female body was not intended to be the end result, as in most product advertising (barring certain situations where advertisers are indeed selling a certain type of body) the proclivity towards thinness is rather a deliberate attempt to suppress the sexual cues and “heighten the sense of the female body as pure status display” (1997, 49). This strategy is particularly prevalent in the fashion industry where the product is actually displayed on the female body, but the result has been a distinct change in the social ideals and conflicting cues represented by the female body.

However, the restraint required of females in contemporary American society has a much richer history than implied by Lupton’s reference to the ‘civilized’ self. Indeed, the history still supports her assertion, but “mythological, artistic, polemical, and scientific discourses from many cultures and eras certainly suggest the symbolic potency of female hunger as a cultural metaphor for unleashed female power and desire...” (Bordo 1993, 116). There are religious roots to this metaphor, as well, explicit in the fall of Eve in the Bible. This implies a greater richness to the discussion. It suggests that female hunger can be both threatening and empowering, for both the male and female, both in the experiences of eating and of sex. Historical understanding is important because many beliefs about food are culturally reproduced, handed down from generation to generation, and are closely tied to family and cultural neighborhoods (Lupton 1996, 25).

Elspeth Probyn presents the relationship between food and sex as a means of exploration, and potentially liberation rather than constraint: “[I]t seems to me that the sensual nature of eating now constitutes a privileged optic through which to consider how identities and the relations between sex, gender and power are being renegotiated” (Probyn 2000, 6-7). The “celebration of food as sex and sex as food” implies the limitations of the dominant and culturally accepted uses of sex (Probyn 2000, 70). Thus, Probyn calls into question the strict moralism of constraint often directed at food and sexuality.

Having considered the visual devices as they interact with verbal communication in offering food and sex, certain historical dimensions of the construction of femininity in terms of food and
sex, and current thought and potential for this topic, I turn to advertising to exemplify and better understand the discussion.

**A LOOK AT ADVERTISING TEXTS: DESSERT AND SEXUAL EXPERIENCE**

The approach in this study is meant as an attempt to ground the kind of theoretical and philosophical discussions just considered. All advertisements involving dessert from two years (2000-2002) of four national magazines—two targeted toward men (Esquire and Men’s Health) and two toward women (Cosmopolitan and Ladies’ Home Journal)—were pulled and sorted into categories according to type of appeal. In order to gain a greater sense of advertising in other magazines and years, various advertisements were strategically pulled for comparison. The advertisements sampled from these two years, however, betray various systematic representations that will be considered for elaboration on issues of food and sex in advertising, and the additional advertisements are used to propose further possible theoretical considerations. There are three main elements of the advertisements that are considered for analysis—the medium (or type of magazine) in which the advertisement appeared, the product advertised, and the type of appeal used in promoting the product.

Both men’s and women’s magazines were used to determine whether the gendered representations of dessert consumption in scholarly works was in fact congruent with advertising placement and texts for this study. Not surprisingly, there was, indeed, a significant difference in the occurrence of sex and food representations between the men’s and women’s magazines sampled. Of the men’s magazines examined, only 17 such ads appeared over two years; in comparison, there were 147 messages of food and sex in the women’s magazines—almost nine times more than in the men’s magazines. This drastic difference suggests that the gendered associations are at least reproduced in advertising texts and placements, if not perpetuated by them. Because of the lack of food/sex messages in the men’s magazines, this analysis will concentrate on the women’s magazines and further expound on the gendered representations of the carnality and liberative possibilities of these pleasures.

Sex and sexuality are often found in nuanced forms. To account for these nuances and avoid collapsing important messages, advertisements were defined according to one of thirteen terms, and those advertisements that did not fit within any of the terms were coded as “other.” The terms include: personal pleasure (consumer-oriented gratification from the product), indulgence (product-oriented extravagance), familial love, romantic love, addiction (the product eased a craving and was compulsive), homemaking/tradition, temptation/weakness (including suggestions of original sin and basic human weakness, but always depicted as playful), humor, human dessert (food personified or humans morphed into the food or food-related product), heavenly/sinful, sexual appeal (direct reference to sex and sex was a specific element of technique), and sexual innuendo (sexual allure was indirect or could be interpreted variously, as with double entendre).

In total, fifteen advertisements for dessert and related products, or advertisements employing dessert in promoting an unrelated product, were found in Esquire in 2000 and 2002. Together, 60% of the dessert advertisements found in Esquire employed sex in their persuasive techniques. Men’s Health contained only two instances of the same dessert-depicting ad.

In contrast, fifty-five instances of such advertisements were found in Cosmopolitan, and eighty-six in Ladies’ Home Journal. Twenty-one of the fifty-five advertisements in Cosmopolitan had an element of sex used in selling the product, ranging from extremely blatant to relatively subtle innuendos. Broken down, 11% of the fifty-five ads used sexual appeal, 27% used sexual innuendo, and together, 38% used sex (including both sexual appeal and sexual innuendo). Finally, of the ninety-two advertisements in Ladies’ Home Journal, only four of them used sex as an appeal; however, numerous more used love, both romantic and familial, as an appeal, as well as love for oneself (in the form of pampering). A more detailed description of selected advertisements provides a deeper analysis of the imagery. Because only one advertisement fitting for this analysis appeared in Men’s Health, that magazine will not be considered in greater depth, although the lack of food, and specifically dessert, advertisements is noteworthy and is included in analysis.

Although Esquire contained the largest percentage, Cosmopolitan contained the largest number of dessert advertisements that portrayed sex as an element of persuasion; further, the sexual imagery in this magazine is particularly more blatant than that found in the other three. In selling space to advertisers, Cosmopolitan suggests the magazine was “created to help contemporary women achieve their goals and live fuller lives. Features cover a broad range of topics including beauty, health and fitness, fashion, relationships and careers. The magazine uses a unique approach, presenting points of view and honest advice much like women would receive from a friend” (Bacon’s Magazine Directory 2002, 2349). This description, however, does not adequately represent the amount of sex found in editorial. For example, cover stories from the magazine include: “Sex tricks only Cosmo would know,” (January 2000), “Supersize your sex life: Take home 10 natty tips from the world’s lustiest lovers. Trust us, he’ll never get his fill of you,” (March 2000)—the list continues with every cover promising at least one story about sex. As well, there are stories that are not specifically about sex as an act but rather unabashedly use sexual appeal for some other purpose, quite often beauty: “Sexy summer beauty” (June 2000); “Have a sex-kitten summer: 33 beauty ideas that will make him purrrrrr,” (July 2000). Thus, sex is a prominent and important component of this magazine and there is a connection between the content of the editorials and the number of advertisements using sexual appeal. The editorial of this magazine clearly suggests a proper fit for dessert advertisers who wish to use a sexual element in their appeals.

However, another dimension must be present—perhaps the gender element at the nexus of food and sex—in the greater number of ads with sexual imagery and appeal found in Cosmopolitan because Esquire, with fewer such ads, is self-described with regular features on sex and relationships (Bacon’s Magazine Directory 2002, 1437). Cover stories from Esquire editions with advertisements for dessert include “53 things a man should know... about sex” (2000). However, this magazine does not have the predominance of sex on its cover that Cosmopolitan has, and indeed, not every cover contains references to sex, despite the previous description.

Ladies’ Home Journal, in contrast to Cosmopolitan, “Focuses on the interests of today’s at-home and working mother (aged 30-45), with features on decorating, entertaining, news, fitness, nutrition, fashion and beauty, parenting, celebrities, family relationships, and today’s contemporary lifestyle” (Bacon’s Magazine Directory 2002, 2360). The actual median age of Ladies’ Home Journal female readers is 47.7, slightly older than the proclaimed audience (MediaMarkt Research Magazine Qualitative Audiences Report, Spring 1998). In contrast, the median age for Cosmopolitan is 31.3, for Men’s Health is 35.9, and for Esquire is 38.2. Cover stories for Ladies’ Home Journal do not include the kind of sexual element driving many of Cosmopolitan’s. They include,
“Always hungry? Appetite tamers for body and soul,” (March 2000) and “Dream desserts made easy” (April 2002). Of the two years sampled, only three instances of sex-related articles appeared on the cover. The types of advertisements found in this magazine, then, are predictably different than those found in the other four magazines.

With consideration to issues of magazine content, more detailed descriptions of advertisements selected provide an impression of the various types of appeals found in dessert ads from the four magazines. The first example from Cosmopolitan is for Godiva Liqueur. In the foreground are three bottles of Godiva and two glasses filled with ice and Godiva. In the background are shadows of a man and a woman, with the woman holding an apple in front of the man’s face. The copy reads, “As if you weren’t already weak enough. No true chocolate lover can resist delicious original Godiva Liqueur, creamy Godiva White Chocolate Liqueur, or rich Godiva Cappuccino Liqueur. Let them inspire you.” (Cosmopolitan January 2000). The clear reference is to the temptation in Eden compared with the bliss of Godiva. Presumably, both the man and woman depicted in the shadows have given into their weakness, or are about to. Linking the temptation of Godiva to the temptation of man and woman confounds the notion of spiritual restraints with a tone of sexuality that denotes weakness, because in this case weakness is rewarded. This method of employing innermost elements of the human psyche and religious references, as they have developed throughout history, seems popular with food advertisers, linking biological impulses with the abilities or weaknesses of the human mind. For example, an advertisement explicitly using an analogy to the Garden of Eden ran in the May 2000 issue of Cosmopolitan. An enlarged apple fills the page of the ad for Jerome’s Microbatch Ice Creams with only the word “Temptation” sharing the major space of the ad. At the bottom of the page is a picture of a pint of the ice cream–Eve’s Sinful Cider–next to the caption. “We can’t make enough of this stuff” (Cosmopolitan May 2000). The juxtaposition of the image of the apple and the picture of the pint of “sinful” cider ice cream leaves little room for misinterpretation.

For reference, a Godiva advertisement was pulled from a December 2002 issue of InStyle. This Godiva ad shows the bottles similarly portrayed, but in the bottom right-hand corner. In the foreground is the body of a woman, her head decapitated in the cropping of the picture, holding in one hand a bowl of ice cream and in the other Godiva Liqueur. In the background is a handsome man sitting on a couch in wait. The copy reads, “Drizzle it all OVER your DESSERT. (You may even try it on the ice cream).” Also provided is a recipe for “The Night Cap.” The copy makes the reference to sex blatant and tells the viewer how to interpret the image using sex. The use of sex in these Godiva advertisements is multi-dimensional. First, the reference is metaphorical and, as Messaris suggested, sex is employed in appeal, but the advertisement is really promising something else. It may be promising great taste or an enjoyable gustatory sensation. But these ads are more complicated because of the fact that Godiva is an alcoholic beverage. Ironically, both despite and because of the suppressant nature of alcohol, it is often linked to sexual encounters. Finally, the translation in these ads may be considered literal, particularly in light of the dual potential they assert—the liqueur can be drizzled on the ice cream or on the man, who becomes in this situation a literal dessert. The ice cream and the man are interchangeable, both becoming sexual objects of desire.

Other times the product actually is depicted in such a way as to make a “human dessert,” particularly when the product itself is not a food product but is endowed with properties (color, smell) of sweets. Esquire ran an ad for RedEnvelope online gifts promoting gourmet chocolate body paint. The two-page spread depicts a woman sitting between a man’s straddled legs, both donning tattoos drawn in chocolate. They are smiling or laughing as she licks his nose and the caption reads, “Perhaps this year, more babies will be born in November. Gourmet Body Paint. A decidedly different Valentine’s Day gift” (Esquire February 2000). In this example, food is not simply a metaphor for sex, but a tool of the sexual experience.

In an advertisement for www.chocolatetogo.com, the advertisers depict a specialty basket “overflowing with gourmet delights… For a little naughty indulgence we have added our body chocolate with a satin blind fold… To add the finishing touches to this breathtaking arrangement we have added a beautifully decorated angelic mint chocolate truffle heart” (Esquire February 2000). This ad contains elements of love, sex, indulgence, and a heavenly appeal–some products in the basket are literally meant to top the body and to be eaten off of the body, and in being such, they are sinful in a delicious, and by extension, positive manner. Brought together by food, these otherwise seemingly disparate elements create a harmonious appeal, just as they do for other products in other ads. On the surface, whether we have become accustomed to them or they have a more fundamental connection, these elements are in accord.

These ads, creating an intimate connection between persons and desserts, even appeal to a shared sense of humor and dialogue, as in ads for M&M’s in which these chocolate candies are personified and put into various human situations. In particular, one of these advertisements depicts a “sensual” female green M&M’s (many Americans are aware of the sexual connotations of the green M&M’s) as if she is posing in a fashion magazine; the copy tells the reader she is “Eye Candy: What does this luscious chocolate M&M’s wear to stand out from the guys in the bag? Attitude” (Cosmopolitan May 2000, June 2000). As Lupton writes about chocolate, “It has become a stereotype that chocolate is a sign of romance, also symbolizing luxury, decadence, indulgence, reward, sensuousness and femininity” (Lupton 1996, 35), and has become conflated with representations of the emotional experience of being “in love” (Lupton 1996). Chocolate, in fact, is the gift of choice for the American commercial holiday of love–Valentine’s Day—and this message is found in chocolates from Godiva to Ferraro Rocher. Godiva compares its chocolates to a very strong love, insinuating a connection to marriage: “Godiva Chocolate will make her heart skip a beat. If she wins the ring, you may need to know CPR” (Esquire February 2002). Similarly, “Rocher is perfect for Valentines: You’ll fulfill the expectation of getting something round, shiny and gold… Luscious chocolate, crunchy hazelnut, crispy wafer and always in good taste” (Ladies’ Home Journal February 2000). Chocolates have a physiological and culturally reinforced association with love and sensuality, emotion, sensation and the rituals of these embodied experiences.

The example of chocolate seems most appropriate in justifying the assertion that “in eating we experience different parts of our bodies: from the physical reaction as we bite into something, past experiences also flock to accompany the savouring of the moment. The same could, of course, be said of sex” (Probyn 2000, 60). We have seen, in the course of this analysis, chocolate as an integral component of the sexual experience in ads for body paint, as a means of showing love for family and for heterosexual partners, and as a food of personal pleasure and indulgence–it can be experienced sensually between two people, socially within a larger social group, and individually for personal reward and indulgence. But, as demonstrated in the predominance of dessert and chocolate advertising in women’s magazines, chocolate is not only viewed as a selfish, even sinful, indulgence, but as one with gendered implica-
tions. Belk and Costa (1998) concluded that women continue to be viewed, and view themselves, as more susceptible to chocolate indulgence—but often in a pleasurable, playful, or unabashedly sexual way.

Of course, the issues of food and sexuality and virtue are not so happily coexistent, and often these very same elements can cause great tension, discomfort, and even harm. The conflation of the human body, sexuality and food is not always depicted by food advertisers as a positive phenomenon. Such is the case in a campaign for Nutri-Grain bars. These ads portray a prominent body part of a person, most often but not solely a woman, enlarge it and supplant it with some food that is fattening and therefore sinful, as the copy slyly points out, warning the viewer, “respect yourself in the morning.” The double entendre, “Respect yourself in the morning” insinuates into these ads an element of sinfulness and, importantly, of tainted sexuality (Cosmopolitan April 2002). In the changing media environment in which men come under increasing scrutiny, women are not the only sinners to be saved from disrepute by Nutri-Grain. A cake substitute for a man’s gut in an advertisement for Nutri-Grain Minis (Cosmopolitan August 2002). Of course, the medium in which an advertisement appears is an important element of the overall effect. This ad for Nutri-Grain depicting the male figure is a fruitful example of why this may be so.

Women are not the only victims of this kind of disrespectful portrayal because here we see a man in a similar situation. However, the advertisement, just as did the others for this product, ran in Cosmopolitan. The scope of this study does not rule out, nor does it attempt to rule out, the possibility that this ad, as well, appears in mediums directed toward men that are outside of the scope of the magazines considered here. Nonetheless, the fact that it is presented in Cosmopolitan suggests an entirely different reaction to it—we may see both men and women who appear to need some directive of restraint, but it is the women to whom this message, through the medium of a woman’s magazine, is most forcefully directed. In this example, food—or more accurately, restraint from food—is portrayed as a form of self-love.

One advertisement for romantic love was found in Esquire and one in Cosmopolitan, both for chocolates. Interestingly, all but two of these advertisements exemplifying food as love come from Ladies’ Home Journal, the magazine that caters to women aged 30-45, with the actual median age of readers at 47.7 years. The magazine catering to mothers, often considered in situations where they are deprived of the satisfaction of and appreciation for their work, holds the most number of examples promising the love they desire in return for the food that they provide. Men and children are most often depicted as the natural recipients of such love and care, as opposed to natural providers and insidiously, females are depicted as providers, with a strong failure by advertisers to portray them as proper recipients of such love and, by extension, of the fulfillment of food (Bordo 1993, 124). If we are to believe this theory that women are not depicted as appropriate recipients of culinary demonstrations of love, it is important for what it implies about the cultural value of femininity.

Food consumption is both ingestion and incorporation of the food and of the meaning of that food. So, the saying, “the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach” is more than a casual cliché. In ingesting the food, meant to denote the time put into preparation, the taste, the sensual experience of the food, one ingests all of those meanings, together with the experience of love. Many beliefs and practices of food and consumption are culturally constructed and reproduced, passed down through generations and articulated in history. Food both links us to and separates us from previous generations and our sense of place within the scope of humanity. But this does not mean that we are without power to change the meanings that we ingest, or that food has always to be about power at all.

CONCLUSION

Food is nourishment, but “food, as a commodity, is consumed not simply for its nourishing or energy-giving properties, or to alleviate hunger pangs, but because of the cultural values that surround it. By the act of purchasing and consuming the food as commodity, those values are transferred to the self… Such commodities are central to the development and articulation of subjectivity” (Lupton 1996, 23). In the modern world, in which food competitors are vying for value and meaning on vastly similar products, it seems that it is they, the advertisers, who determine the meaning of consumption. But as we are ‘articulated’ subjects, determined by the products we consume, we are as much, if not more, “articulating” subjects: through our enactment of practices we reframe new meanings, new identities for ourselves” (Proby 2000, 18). Through the choices and practices of food consumption, not only do we convey love, enjoy taste, texture, sharing, stealing away, we have the power to produce and enact through nourishment and subsistence, the very core of our being, our sexuality. And, as Probyn suggests in her criticism of dominant mores, we do not have to be limited to Puritan standards of consumption, but rather have a world of food ideology from which to draw. Belk and Costa (1998) suggest that researchers “might learn something about the broader stereotype that women are the consummate consumers of the Western world,” (2) and that investigating views of chocolate consumption could provide understandings about more general issues of consumption, including indulgence and control, as well as gender. Similarly, given that advertisers use “symbols of public rituals to invest goods with meaning,” (Otines and Scott 1996, 34) including food consumption rituals and understandings, and given that advertising and consumption rituals interact in creating and modifying culture in the processes of meaning transfer (Otines and Scott 1996), exploring advertising texts could be mutually informative in understanding articulations of gender, sexuality and consumption.

This analysis is an attempt to ground the discourses of food and sexuality in the imagery and messages of dessert and sex presented in one of the most powerful purveyors of cultural symbols. This study was limited to only four magazines, and it is possible that the combination of other magazine’s content and audience might provide a different perspective or suggest further nuances in the messages. More recent advertising texts might be explored to see if there have been further changes over time. The increased focus on men as consumers may alter the landscape of consumption messages of food and sex. And the difference in the types of messages found in Cosmopolitan and in Ladies’ Home Journal suggest an age differential that might be explored further—at what point in a woman’s life and why does it seem, from the advertising texts, that a woman’s interest in dessert products turns from concerns about dessert and sex to dessert and love.

Exploring the current dominant uses of food and sexuality in modern media advertising, as I have attempted to begin here, is critical in understanding how we may reinforce those values that remain positive and sustain our humanity, and how we may change those that are negative and destructive. Perhaps even more importantly, understanding the fascination in the connection between food and sex provides a creative and potentially informative way of exploring, experiencing and developing our humanity.

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