

***Cooking Light's* role in Encouraging Indulgence
and Guilt in American Women**

Cooking Light is marketed toward a large demographic of women, many of whom are young mothers balancing a busy schedule of kids, work, and husband with a limited amount of time left over for themselves. There are however, subsets of audiences reached through this magazine, which include single women who are dedicated to a professional career, and an older generation set. What all these different groups of women have in common is a sense identity through their body, a want for more free time, and a need to feel desired by the opposite sex. The articles speak to empowering women to become fit and offers advice on how to find time to unwind and relax and products that are healthy and time saving. By utilizing theories of ideology and psychoanalysis, one finds that the advertising, on the other hand, speaks to a triad of social ideologies how a woman's control over her body renders her power within the gender dynamic in American society.

Analyzing this magazine in relation to feminist ideology is similar Naomi Wolfe's take on femininity and sexuality. As she asserts, "The fear of being out of control – in relation to food and money as well as sex is characteristic of contemporary women. We understand that loss of control to be inappropriate." (Wolfe, 1997. 72) Much of this concern about control over desire is rooted in Freud's work on the pleasure principle and ego development in general. This ideology is also very similar to Dryer's analysis of women's role in musical theater as a cultural text when he asserts that women's only

capital is their bodies as objects. (Dryer, 1999) By capitalizing upon this ideology, the advertisement don't promote or encourage a woman to become fit, healthy, or less stressed for her own peace of mind and happiness. They play to a woman's insecurities about her body and reconfirm that in order to be valued in today's society, a woman must be desirous for men in order to be personally fulfilled.

While the articles are supportive of a "fit" notion, the advertisements utilize the notion of women as weak and unable to resist temptation and instead encourage the reader to assuage that guilt by consumption. The ads directly play into a notion that women obtain their worth in society by maintaining a fit body and resisting temptation in order to create that body type. The end result in this scenario in which a woman represses her desire for food and indulgence and instead quenches those needs via consumerism is this promise of escape from the stress of everyday life into a utopian reality in which none of these societal norms matter. For Freud, this is a perfect example of the pleasure principle at work. The women readers are forced to repress their desires and sublimate them – redirect them toward a socially acceptable goal. Throughout the entire magazine (both the text and ads) it is restated that this final goal – which is a secure place within society in which stress is unknown, and desires are fulfilled -is only available through a woman's focus on perfecting her body and maintaining her status as desirable.

Cooking Light works hard to maintain this ideology in that the two most popular ads in this text are not placed by accident. The marketing of wine and running shoes are prevalent, and one speaks to the desire of the reader to indulge, and the other toward her guilt in indulging in the first place. The use of Althusser's term interpolation seems aptly

appropriate for this type of a relationship between the social ideology of women's role in society, and the readers of this magazine. In Althusser's rational, if the women who read this article accept that they are impulsive and unable to resist physical desires then they are supporting and confirming not women's place within that ideology as objectified objects valued for their body. (Cormack, 1999)

Chinese Take out and Coppola Wine

Within the first couple of pages, the reader encounters an ad that encourages relaxation (through its use of brown tones) which acknowledges the ideology of women as inclined toward indulgence and encourages the reader to drown the guilt of the indulgence in wine. The ad focuses on selling white wine by superimposing a hand pouring a bottle of wine over greasy and slimy (obviously heavy in fat) take-out Chinese food. The use of an illustrated image with soft curves encourages the reader to relax and unwind. The text states, "Everyday. Wine for Life." which insinuates that those who read this magazine, no matter how health conscious, often (if not daily) divulge in wine and Chinese food – or they at least would like to fulfill that desire.

While the text states that the scenario represents "everyday" life, the use of illustration adds a layer of unreality and fantasy. The ad communicates that from a historical based ideology of women as unrestrained "sinners" (or as Freud would characterize as "narcissistic"), it isn't expected that women will resist because they are predisposition to be irrational and impulsive (i.e. indulging in pleasures that are sinful). (Eagleton, 1907) The editors are counting on the fact that women are unable to resist temptation and will continue to need and buy *Cooking Light* where they can find recipes

and advice that promise to help the reader resist the unhealthy food in this advertisement. There is inherent guilt and a resistance to admit that often one resorts to take out food for dinner, but this ad acknowledges that fact, and suggests that if you have already “cheated” one might as well go all the way and truly treat oneself.

Ahh, the Power of Cheese

Treating oneself to a special item of food that is obviously not “light” is a blatant message throughout the magazine, and many of the recipes echo that sentiment. For the September issue, one needs not look much further than the cover to see an illustration of this with “ooey gooey brownies” gracing the cover. The American Dairy Farmers chose to represent displaced desire with a HUGE plate of spaghetti and meatballs with a towering pyramid of cheese. The ad places a male diner, fork and knife at attention behind a plate onto which cheese is being grated by female hands. The woman is obviously displacing her immediate desire for food by serving the man whose mouth is only inches away from her hands and is grinning ear to ear. One can’t help but wonder at the sexual undertones. The man stands poised, erect with cutlery smiling at a soft white mound that is created by a female figure. The hands gripping the grated cheese are placed in a caressing stance and the man’s mouth looks ready to devour not only the cheese, but the hands in front of him as well. The text at the bottom reads, “Ahh, the power of cheese.” Not only can the reader associate herself with the female who is gaining male approval, but this placement of characters allows for her to displace her fulfillment of desire by identifying with the man who is about to eat.

By playing into women's fear of not being able to capture a man's desire and her repressed desire in relation to food, it suggests that by purchasing the product she can fulfill both desires.

New Balance Shoes as a Means of Escape

Following this foray into the potential of eroticism (which was preceded by advice that a woman should indulge) is an ad for running shoes. The text states "Your computer has a key labeled 'escape' Does your life have one too?" as a female runner sprints over a bridge in an atmosphere reminiscent of Cambridge. The connotative meaning of the text implies that by running (and purchasing the shoes to do so), a woman can escape from her hectic life. What is more interesting about this advertisement, however, is the denotative message that is underlying the pattern of the previous ad placement including this one for shoes. After being tempted to indulge in desire by the ad for wine, the female reader is simultaneously tempted by a mound of food that she must resist in order maintaining a man's desire of her. The reader is then informed that in order to achieve a man's desire, and the ultimate utopia of freedom from everyday stress, the reader must be in shape. By playing toward the dominant ideology of female body image, and simultaneously encouraging the reader to no longer repress her desires, the text and the image for *Cooking Light* have created a cycle of consumerism that plays into Freud's pleasure principle.

Aquafina: the Essential “Pure” Water

The *Aquafina* ad is not only next in succession, but also combines all three themes into one. The concepts of escape from the reader’s everyday life, a sense of forbidden desire (in relation to food and to the opposite sex) and the heavy ideological undertones that a woman maintain her figure in order to maintain her worth. The advertisement is appealing to the eye not only due to the large blue portions and the calming nature of the color, but also due to the placement and expression on the faces of the two main characters.

The ad places two figures in opposition to each other with the woman’s body facing forward while glancing back at a man on a bicycle with a startled yet obviously interested expression on his face. By placing the two figures on city street you can see the female figure paused in her everyday activity in a moment of male attention. The female character is gazing in envy toward the man’s ability to escape via bicycle. The woman is firmly placed as passive and immobile in an environment in which male are active and mobile.

The most interesting feature in this ad, which is blurred in the background, is the figure of a man moving a refrigerator. The refrigerator is caught between the two figures separating them and as the most obvious non-animate figure in the ad (and framed by the text in the foreground) it is worth careful analysis in relation to the larger meaning of the entire text. The text in the ad is the central determinant in deciphering the meaning between the objects and the meaning. The delivery of the message is indirect, which allows the reader to absorb the content without feeling obliged to become a central part of the narrative. The reader is free to engage in a voyeuristic art of catching an intimate

glance without guilt. Instinctively, the reader engaged in Freud's term scopophilia "the taking of other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze." (Eagleton, 59) Within this realm of safety in watching the reader's eyes are drawn back and forth from one figure's expression to the next in a pursuit of discovering the real meaning behind the glance, and all the while absorbing the refrigerator in the background. By gazing at the ad, the reader experiences a form of sexual stimulation by gazing at the man while simultaneously involved in narcissistic identification with the woman in the ad.

The text attempts to place water at the heart of the reader, sublimated desire. "Your eyes are 95% water" can be translated into "you look on in desire" and "Your heart is 80% water" as "You can associate yourself with the desire being displayed" and "Every part of our body needs water" is a blatant reference to the sexuality being expressed in the ad. "Give it the water that is guaranteed pure". You can't indulge in that temptation, but you should instead replace it with something that is morally *pure*. Here again, we see that in order for a woman to become desirable, she must resist temptation and instead consume the product offered. If she does, a sense of escape and ability to explore the unknown is offered to her. In fact, her role in walking away from temptation and consuming Aquafina is essential (as the text illustrates, for if she didn't distract the biker and halt his forward progress, he would inevitably run into the man moving the refrigerator, for they are on the same path. For those readers that have to repress both their desires for food and the man, the pure "holy" glowing water is offered as a more socially acceptable substitute.

The primary goal of *Cooking Light* is not to altruistically make all of their readers happy and healthy in order to improve the well being of American women, but to maintain a need and desire for the content that it provides in order to sustain its financial viability. It is in the editor's best interests to reinforce ideologies that place women's worth squarely in relation to their ability to maintain a body which is attractive to men and notions that reinforce women's insecurities and fears while simultaneously offering a solution. As the largest consumer group, advertisers want to encourage their reader's feelings of inadequacy in relation to their sense of attractiveness and their anxiety over repressed and postponed desires. They simultaneously offer consumer options, which propose solutions to the anxieties that are promoted in the interplay between the visual imagery and the text in the ads.

By utilizing theories of ideology concerning women and body image and Freud's psychoanalysis, it becomes apparent that *Cooking Light*'s focus toward supporting women in health and fitness goals is overshadowed by a system in which those same readers will remain consumers of the magazine. In order to maintain readership, the advertising staff of *Cooking Light* has created a sub-dialogue about women's worth in society underneath the main text of the magazine. On careful analysis, one can see a pattern where women are encouraged to indulge in pleasurable activities and yet are reminded that in order to overcome the guilt of doing so they must exercise in order to maintain a body which grants them power within gendered interactions. Freud's concept of the pleasure principle is hard at work within the articles of the magazine. The advertisements expect that women will fail in the pursuit of repressing their desires (due to their tendency toward a lack in self-control). They will therefore need products to

assuage that promise an idealized future wherein their guilt and stress are gone as well as the pressure to maintain their body image. From the cover touting gooey brownies and phrases like “stand by your bran”, the reader is enticed into a cycle of guilt and desire that will keep her a loyal subscriber.

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