

Condemnation of Female Hunger

Carina J. Luo

University Writing Program, Brandeis University

UWS 16A: Sex and Advertising

Dr. Doug Kirshen

October 20, 2020

Condemnation of Female Hunger

Contemporary advertisements depict two extremes of female hunger: wild, unbridled desire or nonexistent desire. Women tend to be shown in advertisements as either biting zealously into a hamburger or demurely indulging in a single chocolate. This may cause real women to feel like their only two options are to be one extreme or the other, leading them to develop obsessive eating habits. The possibility of hunger that is present but is not all consuming is not shown in advertisements. Desire is a sliding scale, not an on and off switch. Yet in advertising, we only see women that either have their desires under tight control or that are completely controlled by their desires. Women who have achieved the former are depicted positively and women who experience the latter are depicted negatively, which teaches women to fear losing control of their appetites. The examination of these extremes through the lens of Susan Bordo's "Hunger as Ideology" reveals that these types of advertisements foster an unhealthy obsession with controlling female hunger by condemning it.

In her essay, Bordo examines how food advertisements teach women what their relationship with food should be. She shows that these expectations originate in societal conceptions of femininity that are incongruous with the desires of real women by studying advertisements in which women are shown to have a cool, casual relationship with food that gives them the freedom to indulge their desires while maintaining a pristine physique. A key point Bordo makes is that these women seem to only need to indulge *a little* to feel satisfied, an image that she identifies as stemming from Victorian era ideas of gender. "Hunger as Ideology" also investigates advertisements that portray binge behavior, identifying the stress of repressing the desire to indulge as the cause of such behavior.

"Stiff," a commercial for Mike's Hard Lemonade (Saum), is an advertisement that depicts binge behavior as the result of uncontrolled desire. An attractive female undertaker notices that a cadaver has what appears to be an erection. She approaches it and, before taking action, opens the

cadaver's eyes, presumably to check that the man is really dead. Then, after hesitantly touching the unidentified bulge, she looks around her. When women binge, it is an activity that is engaged in alone, secretly (Bordo 1993). By checking that the cadaver is really dead, the undertaker is engaging in the preparatory binge behavior of making sure that there will be no witnesses when she unleashes her appetite. In the next couple seconds, we see the table squeaking and the corpse moving up and down. The woman makes grunting noises, her hair has become messy, and it looks like she is not wearing a shirt underneath her white lab coat. All of these details suggest that the woman is having sex with the corpse. At this point, viewers are probably enrapt with fascinated disgust. The shock of necrophilia assaults the mind. Here is a woman's appetite unleashed as she binges uncontrollably. A woman's hunger symbolizes unleashed female power (Bordo 1993), and this advertisement showcases the power that a hungry woman has to do evil. The undertaker has transgressed, crossed a line not meant to be crossed. Women with an appetite are dangerous creatures and should be regarded with terror and loathing (Bordo 1993). Disgust with the taboo act might become subconsciously associated with female desire in the minds of viewers, leading them to think that hungry women will inevitably lose control and consume the body of the male (Bordo 1993). In this advertisement, the cadaver is the male body that is being consumed as the woman feeds sexually upon him.

When it is revealed that the bulge was a lemonade bottle, we realize that the undertaker's appetite was food-driven hunger. Is this advertisement about hunger or sexual appetite? The answer is both. This advertisement is an example of a woman's voracious appetite for food being used as a metaphor for sexual appetite (Bordo 1993). Driven by her desire to extract the food item, the undertaker becomes consumed in a sexual frenzy. This advertisement teaches women that their desires for food and sex are indistinguishable, and furthermore that if they have such desires then they will be consumed by those desires.

Figure 1. Mike's Hard Lemonade, "Stiff" (Saum).



Bordo claims that in rare instances of near-starvation, women in advertisements are permitted to lust for food (1993). "Stiff" is a counterexample. The undertaker is, in a way, in a state of near starvation, for her profession dictates that her daily interaction with living humans is limited. It is plausible that because she does not interact much with people, she may be socially awkward and sexually deprived. With this knowledge, viewers of the advertisement might be forgiving of an indiscretion such as if the undertaker were to have sex with a living coworker next to a cadaver. Instead, the undertaker is shown having sex with a cadaver, something completely taboo, something no amount of sexual deprivation excuses. The intended message of this advertisement is that people should buy Mike's Hard Lemonade, but the choice to use such an extreme example of female hunger also sends the less obvious message that a woman's lust for food cannot be excused even if there are extenuating circumstances. A hungry woman will be completely conquered by her desire, will lose all semblance of decency, will behave in ways that are disgustingly immoral. A hungry woman is always a monster. This is how female hunger is condemned. "Stiff" depicts female hunger as something that is disgustingly offensive and should be regarded fearfully. The implication is that if women do not control their hunger then they will lose control of it.

If “Stiff” is a cautionary example of what women must not be allowed to become, then “The French Girl,” an advertisement for yogurt by Yoplait (Daily Commercials), is the shining example of what women are taught to strive for. Advertisers play upon women’s repressed desires by offering them carefully contained indulgence (Bordo 1993). But of course, this indulgence is only for women who have an iron control of their desires. Melanie, “the French girl,” leads an effortless lifestyle, and at the center of that lifestyle is a cool, effortless relationship with food. She is shown casually eating a dainty bite of bread while standing in a kitchen with sunlight filtering in through the window. Her house is stylish, her clothing is simple yet stylish, and her hair is messy, but casually, sexily messy. Her French bulldog is appropriately small and quiet, and her elegant, heeled shoes make gentle clicks as she walks through gorgeous scenery. The voiceover is done by a man with a French accent who tells us that for Melanie, there are more important things than being practical. Melanie sits down at a chic outdoor restaurant, and the audience is introduced to her three attractive male lovers. The waiter places a small container of Oui yogurt before her, and she demurely takes a bite, leaving no trace of yogurt mess on the spoon or on her face. The voiceover says that she will focus only on her yogurt, then shows Melanie making slow, deliberate eye contact with each of her lovers. The voiceover tells us that the lovers will wait for her to finish her yogurt, and we see that they are bored but that they are not pressuring her to speed up. The voiceover is in English, but with grammatical peculiarities that viewers are meant to find endearing. The consumption of French bread, the French bulldog, and French lovers are all things that are stereotypically French. In this advertisement, the consumption of yogurt is romanticized, building on our infatuation with the superior sophistication of Europe (Bordo 1993). Sophisticated European women are the enviable “other” that have transcended the desires of the flesh, indifferent about the basic material necessities for survival (Bordo 1993). The contrast between Americans and Europeans is even explicitly stated by the voiceover: Melanie is not practical. The unspoken second half of this is that Americans *are* practical, and that this practicality is what holds them back from achieving Melanie's

Figure 2. Yoplait. "Oui by Yoplait: The French Girl" (Daily Commercials).



effortlessness. While American women must hold back their desires, Melanie is free to indulge. For Melanie, there is no danger in indulging because she has control over her hunger.

"Oui" yogurt seems to be part of a lifestyle of indulgence in which women can finally satisfy their cravings, with Oui yogurt representing food desire and the three lovers representing sexual desire, but it is not. This advertisement is actually about having the discipline to experience pleasure without giving into cravings. Yes, Melanie has three lovers, but she is making them wait, glancing teasingly at each of them before ignoring them. She takes small bites of yogurt but does not zealously spoon it into her mouth. Melanie does not finish her yogurt, but there is no question of her asking for another yogurt, even though the container is so small. While real women would feel unsatisfied with such a tiny serving, Melanie is fine because she has a cool relationship with her desires (Bordo 1993). When control is presented in this way--that is, as the preventative solution to becoming the hunger monster woman--then an obsession with controlling hunger develops.

Women watch these advertisements and seek to emulate Melanie's state of enlightenment, because they believe that by living like Melanie they will be immune to the monstrosity of the undertaker. What they may not realize is that these two extremes are not separate states. They are part of a larger issue of women's unhealthy relationships with food. In "Stiff," a woman with a voracious appetite commits a taboo act, cementing the idea that a woman who indulges without restraint is monstrous. In "The French Girl," a woman with a carefully controlled appetite is shown indulging with careful control, generating the idea that female hunger is only permissible if it is restrained. Together, the two advertisements paint the picture that in order to avoid the danger of uncontrollable hunger women can never lose control of their hunger. This obsessive attitude towards food keeps women constantly hungry, searching for answers to their hunger in the very advertisements that create the problem. Breaking the pattern of fear, deprivation, and hunger will require acceptance of women who satisfy their desires rather than controlling them. Advertisements that depict women with a healthy relationship with food are the key to showing real women that they do not have to have extreme eating habits and that they can instead find a happy medium in which hunger is not something to be feared.

References

Bordo, S. (1993). Hunger as Ideology. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western culture, and the body*, University of California Press, 99-134.

Daily Commercials. (2017?). *Oui by Yoplait: The French Girl* [Video]. Daily Commercials.

<https://dailycommercials.com/oui-yoplait-french-girl/>

Saum, R. L. [Rickey Lee Saum]. (2016, July 3). "*Stiff*" - *Mike's Hard Lemonade Commercial* [Video].

YouTube. **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hs3QG_J50So**