The Carnal Feminine: Womanhood, Advertising and Consumption

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ABSTRACT
This is a study of the identification of women with carnality and nature in contemporary television advertisements, and the age-old social and cultural values that underpin this association. A selection of current UK television advertisements—for food, toiletry and cosmetic products—are discussed in relation to this conflation, under three key themes: the erotic, the carnivalesque and the pornographic. The paper concludes by speculating on why this identification remains ubiquitous in our culture, and whether this should be a matter of concern, from a feminist perspective, or whether it should be viewed as a harmless, ironic, postmodern trope in our culture.

INTRODUCTION
Advertisements are myth carriers in our culture, rich with symbolic and metaphoric content (Hirschman, 2000). They are also a mirror reflecting the beliefs and values of the wider socio-cultural milieu within which they are situated, reiterating and sustaining the norms and values of a culture. These values are conveyed through the language, imagery, rhetoric and symbolic signs used in advertising texts, and such texts communicate with us at a profound, emotional level, drawing on deep-rooted cultural meanings that are embedded in our collective cultural consciousness (McCracken, 1988; Thompson, 2004; Holt, 2004). This is a study of the identification of women with carnality in contemporary television advertisements addressing women, the socio-cultural values that underpin this association, and the wider implications of this age-old identification of womanhood with nature.

In order to unravel the complex strands of meanings and signs embedded in advertisements, we will discuss a selection of current television advertisements in the UK that, we argue, provide examples of three key aspects of this overarching conflation of womanhood and carnality. These we describe as the erotic, the carnivalesque and the pornographic. We will conclude by speculating on why the identification of womanhood and carnality remains ubiquitous in advertising texts in our culture, and whether this should be a matter of concern, from a feminist perspective, or whether it should be viewed as an ironic, postmodern, post-women’s liberation trope that no longer has oppressive power in our culture.

THE CARNAL FEMININE
According to the Oxford English Dictionary, carnal means ‘of the body or flesh; worldly’. Its secondary meaning is ‘worldly, sensual, sexual’. Carnal is from the Latin carnalis, from caro carnis meaning ‘flesh’. Traditionally women have been identified with the body and nature, and men have been identified with the mind and culture. Whilst the binary opposites of man/woman, mind/body, culture/nature, subject/object, and so on, have been challenged by postmodern thought, nevertheless, these Cartesian opposites continue to provide a reference and indeed an underpinning for contemporary cultural texts such as advertisements.

The context in which we use the notion of carnality in this study is to discuss advertising narratives that depict women in a carnal light, namely advertisements that show women behaving in a sensual or sexual way, and that represent women as being controlled by their bodily desires. The notion of carnality is particularly interesting in the context of advertising, of course, in that it is commonly supposed that advertisers appeal to such wants and desires in order to entice us to consume their products or services. It is also widely accepted that increasingly marketers use experiential appeals to consumers’ emotions and senses, rather than factual appeals to consumers’ rational and practical sides.

From our perspective as consumer behavior researchers, there are two relevant aspects to the nexus of womanhood, advertising and carnality. One is postmodernism, and the other is feminism, and indeed the so-called return to the body in cultural and social studies has been attributed to both. Postmodernism and feminism, their contribution to our understanding of consumer culture and, specifically, advertising texts, and how concepts of womanhood are produced and perpetuated by them, is now discussed.

THE CARTESIAN LEGACY, POSTMODERNISM AND CONSUMER CULTURE
From time immemorial, the mind and body have been conceptualized as a man/woman split. Marina Warner, for example, writes about women’s ‘ancient associations’ with ‘carnality, instinct and passion’, in contrast to men, who are ‘endowed with reason, control and spirituality’ (in Schiebinger, 2000, p. 287). Camille Paglia (1992) also offers a full and eloquent account of women’s historical association with nature as distinct from culture. What we now refer to as the Cartesian split of mind and body, associated with the French philosopher Rene Descartes, is deeply rooted in a more distant past, and it is one of a number of binary opposites perpetuated and re-presented through time. This split is closely identified with a split between masculinity and femininity.

For the past decade or so, there has been an inter-disciplinary surge of interest in the body across the academy. This contrasts with a previous privileging of the mind in modernist thinking, and a concomitant privileging of the masculine over the feminine. The shift in emphasis from the mind to the body is usually attributed to postmodernism and the rise of consumer culture in the latter half of the twentieth century, whereby the Protestant work ethic gave way to a postmodern, secular emphasis on leisure, pleasure, and unrestrained consumption (see, for example, Featherstone, 1991; 1993).

The body has until comparatively recently been a neglected subject in our discipline. This is not entirely surprising, of course, given the privileging of (masculine) mental processes, cognition and rationality over the (feminine) sensory processes of instinct and emotionality. Indeed, Joy and Venkatesh (1994) argue that consumption itself has been conceptualized and described as a disembodied phenomenon in traditional consumer research. They also observe that whilst in general terms the body, in all its complexity, has been largely ignored in consumer research, there has nevertheless been a preoccupation with colonizing and spectacularizing the female body. This is a perspective that is entirely consistent with a modernist discourse, they note, but it is one that is challenged in postmodern discourse, as the male body becomes increasingly commodified and scrutinized. The growing interest in the body in the consumer behavior discipline is thus regarded as symptomatic of postmodernism’s celebratory and liberatory emphasis, which addresses the complexities and interconnectedness of the body and the mind in consumption (Joy and Venkatesh, 1994; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). According to Joy and Venkatesh (1994), the binary opposites of man/woman, mind/body, culture/nature, sub-
ject/object, and so on, are being disbanded, and this, they argue, heralds a new age when women emerge as sexual subjects rather than passive objects of male desire, and thus are no longer perceived as the embodied ‘other’.

Alongside the growing interest in the body in consumer behaviour research has been a broader definition of consumption, which embraces concepts such as consumption, thus firmly positioning consumer behavior in the experiential domain. This is largely associated with the work of Holbrook (1987, 1995). Holbrook argues that consumption is nothing less than the search for consumption, namely satisfaction and completeness. He writes that ‘our lives comprise one constant and continual (though not always successful) quest for consumption’ (1987, p. 131). Indeed Holbrook believes that ‘Consummations of one sort or another are what all humans and therefore all consumers seek.’ (1995, p. 88). In so saying Holbrook underlines the notion of desire in consumer behavior, and this rich vein of research increasingly flows in the discipline, conflating human desire with product consumption, and emphasizing the tangible, bodily and sensory elements of consumers’ interactions with products and services in the marketplace.

Other scholars have also articulated the importance of desire in consumption. Gabriel and Lang (1995), for example, write that modern consumption unfolds in the realm of seduction, where goods are chosen not for their uses but rather act as objects of fantasy, and Bocock (1993) suggests that unconscious desires ‘are now articulated in the symbols of consumerism’, (p. 114), with consumption offering the promise of satisfaction, not the “real thing”, which would be actual orgasmic satisfaction (p. 115). But, according to Bordo (1993), the challenge of consumer culture lies in the struggle to manage desire in a world that offers ‘a proliferation of desirable commodities’ and ample opportunities for excessive consumption (p. 195).

If human desire and consumption are both envisaged as a search for consumption, then it can be little wonder that so much advertising text refers to sexual desire and sexual consumption. Erotic imagery is used to suggest sexual consumption, as a means of enticing us to purchase and consume particular products. Whilst this is usually suggested in a humorous way in advertisements, it nevertheless underlines a significant cultural code, we argue, namely the gendered nature of this identification with carnal appetites. Indeed we will suggest that this identification is primarily prevalent in advertisements targeting women consumers.

Television advertisements offer an abundance of examples of erotic imagery, sexual innuendos and consumer consummations, but this is not matched with an abundance of research on the topic, and its implications in the wider context of consumer culture generally. According to Belk, Ger and Askegaard (1996) and Thompson and Holt (1997), consumer desires are seldom mentioned in the consumer behavior literature, despite the fact that they are all pervasive in contemporary culture, expressed through metaphors such as magic, religion, fire, romantic love, dreams, thirst, hunger, sex, and addiction. Belk et al (1996) argue that it is only when we view consumers as having desiring bodies and minds that we can better appreciate the important roles of myth, fantasy and the imagination in consumption. They write that the sexual metaphor in consumer desire is one that ‘suggests that the state of wanting itself is simultaneously exciting, pleasurable, and frustrating: an exquisite torture.’ (p. 370). In so saying they point to the bittersweet nature of this narrative. This ambivalence is particularly marked in food advertisements targeting women, we argue, as these narratives tune into this ambivalence, simultaneously enticing consumers to consume them and chastising consumers for their weakness in succumbing to the allure of such advertising appeals.

**Feminism, the Body and Consumption**

The body became the focus of second wave feminism in the 1970s in terms of highlighting issues such as fertility and abortion. Theorists such as Susan Bordo (1993) argued that the neglect of the body was a product of the dualisms of Cartesian thought, which divided human experience into a bodily and spiritual realm. According to Bordo, womanhood became synonymous with the corporeal, as opposed to the spiritual. The feminine thus came to define nature, emotionality, irrationality and sensuality (Bordo, 1993; Davis, 1997). Womanhood had a dangerous, appetitive and volatile nature, in contrast to manhood, which was disciplined, rational and controlled, and unlike men, women were at the mercy of their mortal bodies, subject to the body’s frailties and vagaries, in both mysterious and unpredictable ways (Schiebinger, 2000). Womanhood was a force of nature that needed to be tamed and controlled by objective manhood, typically represented by the male scientist and his pathological female patient (Showalter, 1987).

By bringing the ‘unruly’ female body back into feminist studies, feminist scholarship shows how women’s bodies are experienced and symbolically represented in social and cultural practices. In cultural studies, women’s experiences with their bodies have largely been explored in terms of beauty practices, fashion, fitness regimes, eating disorders and cosmetic surgery (Davis, 1997). Much of this research shows how the female body is continually de-constructed and re-constructed, moulded and shaped, in order to try to achieve normalization in terms of physical appearance. According to Davis (1997), feminist perspectives on the body typically attend to three problematic: difference, domination, and subversion.

Difference, usually associated with Simone de Beauvoir and French feminists such as Helene Cixous, eschews biological determinism, whilst arguing that gender is socially constructed, but the sexed body is not. These critics point to women’s difference and the materiality of feminine embodiment, which may be experienced as oppressive or empowering. Domination studies focus on how the female body is ‘symbolically deployed’ (Davis, 1997, p. 10) to justify and perpetuate power hierarchies based on gender difference. Much of this research focuses on how the female body is regulated and colonised by patriarchy, and it calls for collective forms of resistance and to women reclaiming their bodies and developing more ‘authentic’ and empowering relationships with their bodies. Susan Bordo’s analysis of the Cartesian legacy of mind over matter is probably one of the best known examples of this school of thought.

Finally, subversion focuses on women’s active and knowledgeable engagement with their bodies. Davis (1997) refers to one aspect of this as ‘biographical agency’, through acts such as cosmetic surgery, arguably a form of transgressive body politics. In keeping with postmodernism, this emphasis would focus on the symbolic spaces and alternative identities such subversive acts create, and is often regarded as (post)feminist research, typified by the work of Probyn, Butler and Grosz (Davis, 1997). The revaluation of the body and indeed the physicality of consumption is also a key element of postmodern feminist research (Shildrick, 1997).

Davis proposes that the three strands of difference, domination and subversion come together in what she terms embodied feminist theory. This takes account of the individual, material body in everyday life as well as the social and cultural theories that surround it in contemporary culture, and also addresses and explores the challenges and tensions that the body evokes.

If we pursue a postmodern feminist perspective, the use of carnal narratives in advertisements targeting women may be viewed as liberatory and indeed empowering ‘play’. Alternatively, we can
take a more modernist, feminist view, and see such narratives as reflecting a reiteration of the ancient perception of woman as a lesser mortal than man, constantly at the mercy of her animal instincts and ‘weak’ flesh. There may be a third option, however, that seeks to call attention to the issue and emphasise its complex and problematic nature.

We argue that advertisements often portray women as ‘consummate consumers’ who are ruled by their bodies and thus are less able than men to resist the lure of carnal pleasures (Belk, 1998; Belk and Costa 1998). The gender discourse of the marketplace, whereby men are identified with production and women are identified with consumption, is a given in the history of marketing and consumer behavior research. Furthermore, we argue that this manifests itself as an identification of women with carnality, usually in the form of experiential consumption and sensory pleasures. The narrative is particularly overt in the advertising of products (of which there are many) that are depicted as being endowed with the power to enable women to experience intense pleasure from their consumption. Examples of product categories that are depicted as objects of desire for women include dairy products such chocolate, ice-cream and cream cheese; luxury biscuits; and toiletries and cosmetics, such as shampoo, bath and shower products, and perfume.

The main carnal attributes that are attributed to women in advertising narratives are primarily those associated with sex and food. Often these two drives combine, so that food, toiletry, and cosmetic products often draw on symbolic codes that suggest aspects of sexual love, such as seduction, sexual climax and auto-eroticism. The association of women’s consumption of food and toiletries with their sexual appetites provides advertisers with opportunities to explore a ‘naughty but nice’ discourse with considerable abandon. The discourse also has a dark side, however, in that there is always the implication that to give in to one’s powerful appetites may have unfortunate and undesirable outcomes. What happens when women’s bodily appetites become excessive?

Clear parallels are drawn in advertising between women’s appetites and women’s potential for excessive consumption, be it food or other pleasures of the flesh. Indeed Stratton (2003) argues that food products are generally embedded within a carnal (and often specifically erotic) narrative in advertisements targeting women because these narratives are based on the assumption that ‘eating is women’s secret pleasure, reminding women of the repressed pleasures of their own bodies’ (p. 237).

There can be little doubt that women often have a complex attitude to and relationship with food in Western culture. This is a culture that on the one hand encourages over-indulgence, and on the other hand chastises those whose lack of self-control leads to body shapes deemed unacceptable or aesthetically displeasing in this culture (Bordo, 1993, Wolf, 1991; Orbach, Urla & Sweldlund, 2000). Feminist critique of consumer culture undermines the difficulties faced by women in consumer societies and the ideals that bombard them (Wolf, 1991). There are numerous examples in advertisements of the double entendres facilitated by this rich narrative of women’s underlying yet ultimately overwhelming carnal natures, thus creating a market for luxurious food products that offer indulgence without the penalty. This usually translates as ones that don’t have high calories attached, such as the low-calorie range of chocolate biscuits called ‘Go Ahead’.

In their study of women’s chocolate consumption, Belk and Costa (1998) acknowledge that consumption of luxury foods is gendered as female. They also refer to the ‘emotionally charged’ environment within which women consume chocolate (p. 189), and ambivalence is acknowledged as an integral part of women’s consumption of such products. Indeed Lupton (1996) writes that chocolate signifies ‘romance, luxury, decadence, indulgence, reward, sensuousness and femininity’ (p. 35). Advertisements for chocolate address this ambivalence in their seductive and often tongue-in-cheek narratives of women succumbing to the temptation of eating pleasurable, high-calorie, often luxury food products. Historically, chocolate’s association with love and its aphrodisiacal properties has been well-documented (Lupton, 1996). We are now told that chocolate is a particularly seductive product because of the ‘love molecule’, phenylethylamine, it contains, which supposedly means that chocolate has the ability to simulate the euphoria and quickening of the pulse associated with being in love, an association which is highly visible in most chocolate advertisements targeting women. Chocolate is memorably envisaged as holding the key to ‘happiness’ in the recent Cadbury’s chocolate campaign, in which an assortment of bizarre animal ‘pets’ materialize, and encourage their female owners to give into their ‘happiness’, namely eat some Cadbury’s chocolate. Lupton (1996), citing Barthel (1989), notes that culturally, such melting moments signify the dissolve of sexual surrender.

To summarise, in the world of contemporary advertising women are portrayed (and targeted by advertisers) as being ‘essentially’ ruled by their carnal natures. The ‘naughty but nice’ narrative that pervades advertisements addressing women is one that is rooted in long-standing, traditional models of femininity, through its association with women’s bodily transgressions and weaknesses, and above all women’s susceptibility to temptation and sin. It is therefore a narrative that needs to be understood within the context of a dominant one that equates women with nature and the body, in binary opposition to men’s equation with culture and the mind (Paglia, 1992). Indeed contemporary advertising appeals resonate with us because there is a socio-cultural recognition that such animal wants are powerful in women and therefore they must be expected as well as controlled, indulged in as well as ridiculed, stimulated as well as policed. As consumers women are thus tempted by a never-ending array of erotically and emotionally charged advertising narratives, narratives that also point to the bittersweet ambivalence that lies at the core of such appeals and such consumer desires. Women’s apparently insatiable desire for ‘naughty but nice’ products must be catered for, after all women have neither the will nor, if advertisers are to be believed, the biological makeup to resist them!

THE METHOD

Eileen Fischer in her Advances in Consumer Research paper of 2000 summarises the main postmodern approaches to analysing texts. One of these is ‘historical and genealogical approaches to discerning the symbolic webs of meaning in which advertising texts are embedded and the bricolage of sign fragments on which they draw.’ (p. 289). This is largely the approach we have taken in our paper. Over the past three or four years we have watched and discussed numerous advertisements targeting women. In doing so we have been struck by the centrality of the theme of carnality in the many advertisements targeting women, especially those for food, toiletries, and cosmetics. We thus began to explore the historical and genealogical context of women’s conflation with carnality and nature. This enabled us to better comprehend the complex webs of signs and meanings embedded within the ads. This iterative process led us to identify three key themes, namely the erotic, the carnivalesque and the pornographic, and these form the basis of the discursive analysis that follows. We should stress that we are not attempting to predict consumer responses to these ads, nor do we claim to understand the intentions of the creators of these ads. We merely mean to show how the conflation of womanhood with
carnality manifests itself in advertising narratives targeting women, and in so doing we hope to highlight and better understand some of the implications of this ubiquitous narrative in our culture.

**THE EROTIC**

The erotic refers to ‘sexual love’, and to stimuli that cause sexual love, especially tending to arouse sexual desire or excitement. Perhaps the best known advertisement that exactly expresses this narrative is the Herbal Essences shampoo campaign by Clairol, which displays a woman washing her hair in a shower. The climax (in more ways than one) of the ad has the woman saying ‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’ in an excited tone of voice, mirroring the infamous Meg Ryan moment in the film When Harry Met Sally, when Sally mimics having an orgasm in a coffee shop, much to the embarrassment of Harry! The Herbal Essences advertisement ends with the strap-line ‘A totally organic experience’, thereby underlining the sexual narrative at its core and its ‘naturalness’.

A significant aspect of the erotic narrative in advertising to women is those ads that make parallels between women’s sexual seductiveness and their consumption of food. Such ads use an erotic narrative that assumes both a female and a male gaze and implies male sexual pleasure, a la Freud, from observing woman’s consumption of food products. Indeed Bordo (1993) argues that female appetite and female sexuality are conflated in our culture. A TV ad for Wall’s Cornetto range of luxury ice-creams features an attractive young woman on a balcony slowly consuming her ice cream with a spoon whilst watching a handsome artist at work in the room opposite. He is aware that she is being watched, and with each mouthful that she takes the artist becomes increasingly distracted from his work and aroused by her, indicated by some auto-erotic body stroking on his part and an increase in perspiration! Finally he can’t bear it any longer and he rushes from the room, presumably in the direction of her apartment, judging by her knowing smile towards the door at the end of the ad. This association is most overt in the advertising of chocolate and luxury ice-cream bars (the Cadbury’s Flake ad and Wall’s Magnum campaign providing two excellent exemplars) when the Freudian symbolism inherent in the consumption of such products is used to full effect. Bordo (1993) writes that in our culture the act of a woman eating is equated with consumption of such products is used to full effect. Bordo (1993) argues that female appetite and female sexuality are conflated in our culture. A TV ad for Wall’s Cornetto range of luxury ice-creams features an attractive young woman on a balcony slowly consuming her ice cream with a spoon whilst watching a handsome artist at work in the room opposite. He is aware that she is being watched, and with each mouthful that she takes the artist becomes increasingly distracted from his work and aroused by her, indicated by some auto-erotic body stroking on his part and an increase in perspiration! Finally he can’t bear it any longer and he rushes from the room, presumably in the direction of her apartment, judging by her knowing smile towards the door at the end of the ad. This association is most overt in the advertising of chocolate and luxury ice-cream bars (the Cadbury’s Flake ad and Wall’s Magnum campaign providing two excellent exemplars) when the Freudian symbolism inherent in the consumption of such products is used to full effect. Bordo (1993) writes that in our culture the act of a woman eating is equated with sexual love, especially tending to arouse sexual desire or excite-ment. Perhaps the best known advertisement that exactly expresses such an approach is the Terry’s Chocolate Orange campaign. This campaign memorably casts the generously proportioned English comedienne and actress Dawn French as the insatiable chocoholic who can’t control her consumption of Terry’s Chocolate Orange and nor does she want to. Above all, she wants to keep this pleasure to herself and has no desire to share her Chocolate Orange: ‘It’s not Terry’s! It’s mine’. We are also led to assume that she is supremely indifferent to the bodily consequences of such indulgence, and indeed Dawn French takes a celebratory approach to being a larger woman generally, not least by developing a range of clothing for women with larger than average body shapes. Such an approach plays on but also challenges the acknowledged difficulties experienced by American women in particular, in relation to body fat, according to Counihan (1999).

The humour in the Terry’s Chocolate Orange campaign reflects Dawn French’s own flamboyant, comedic style, but not all advertisements featuring larger women are as playful and sympathetic as this. Often women of ample proportions are used for comic effect in advertising, as they are frequently depicted as being ridiculous and undesirable when they become too obese. A Miller’s beer ad shows a chubby woman discarding her bikini top on a beach on the Costa del Sol, watched in horror by two young, handsome Spanish men. This scene is then contrasted with two attractive young women wearing bikini tops on a beach in the USA. In another recent example for a car advertisement, the scene is a wife swapping party. A larger than average sized woman delves into a bowl of keys and all the men are shown to shift about uncomfortably, avoiding eye-contact with her, until they note which car keys she is holding, then they are all clamour to be chosen by her, in the hope that sleeping with her will give them access to her car. A similar narrative is also used in a current ad for Alpen muesli breakfast
cereal, in which a man misunderstands an overheard conversation between his plump and homely wife and her slimmer, more glamorous and groomed friend, and gleefully assuming that some ‘swinging’ is on the cards he makes it clear that he welcomes this prospect, much to his wife’s dismay and disgust. The ad ends with his disgruntled wife seeking solace in a bowl of Alpen cereal whilst cold-shouldering her hapless, would-be-errant husband.

Older women may also find themselves the butt of sexual jokes in advertising campaigns. In one Herbal Essences TV advertisement, for example, an old lady in hair curlers is sitting up in bed with her husband. He is reading, but she is distracted by the orgasmic sounds emanating from the room next door, and we are shown a young woman in a shower washing her hair with Herbal Essences shampoo. The old woman, on hearing the young woman say ‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’ mutters that she’d be happy with just the one, clearly underlining her sexual appetites and her sexual frustration, as it would appear her husband prefers a good book to having sex with his wife. This female stereotype reminds one of the ancient, ribald and sexually insatiable Wife of Bath in Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales.

THE PORNOGRAPHIC

The identification of food consumption with sexual intercourse is well-documented in all cultures (see Counihan, 1999, for a discussion of this). In advertising, this identification may be expressed in its extreme form via the use of pornographic codes. The pornographic often denotes prostitution and sex for sale, and is rooted in the concept of domination over women, often through violence. It assumes male superiority and female objectivity and mistreatment (Stern, 1991). It also commodifies the human body and persistently stereotypes male and female sexual roles (Schroeder & McDonagh, 2004). The pornographic is increasingly drawn on to explore aspects of food consumption and different modes of sensuality. Indeed Probyn (2000) discusses the ‘soft porn’ antics of celebrity TV cooks, and quotes Nigella Lawson’s view that ‘we are all now gastropornographers’. Lawson goes on to observe: ‘it makes perfect sense that in a ‘puritanical’ age ‘the last allowable excess should be gastroporn’ (Lawson, 1999, pp. 153-154). The Kinder Bueno range of chocolate bars is an excellent exemplar of the pornographic, and freely uses ‘porn codes’. This campaign memorably and disturbingly uses these codes to personify the product as a female prostitute (the product range previously targeted young children). It features a male customer, complete with dirty mac, furtively entering a newsagents’ shop and casting his eye up to the top shelf of the magazine racks. His attention is arrested, however, by the voice of a young, high-pitched Far-Eastern accented female voice urging him to ‘bite me bite me, I’ll be whatever you want me to be’, a voice that emanates from a gyrating chocolate bar. Clearly the ad draws on sadomasochistic porn codes to make the product memorable and appealing to its new target market, adult males.

In a similar vein, an ad for Pot Noodles shows a man rejecting his wholesome wife’s offer of a home-made sandwich so that he can search for ‘something dirty’ in the local red light district. Having been slapped by a number of indignant ladies of the night by his whispered requests, he eventually finds a ‘tart with a heart’ who takes him into a dark alley, and there he finds what he’s been looking for, a Pot Noodle. More recently, a horse-riding and hunting analogy is used in this series, with references made to an upper class lady (with more than a passing resemblance to Lady Chatterley) and her lusty gamekeeper. The campaign currently uses a riding horn (‘have you got the horn?’) to suggest the product’s association with sexual arousal and the sex act itself.

Both these examples gender such food products as feminine, and interestingly, both these examples identify men’s consumption of bad products with their consumption of bad women, a device that one might argue is another aspect of the perception of woman as insatiable consumer luring men from the straight and narrow path, but in this case she is also the product itself, a commodity that men can’t resist, and that is insatiably consumed, and, even worse, a product that is bad for men’s health! In other advertisements, a woman eating a product is laden with sexual suggestiveness and indeed sexual service, as in the following example, a phone sex service. A current ad for Muller Corners luxury yoghurts features a woman slowly taking a spoonful of yoghurt for the benefit of her partner who is clearly on a business trip to the Far East, as he is flanked on either side by two Asian businessmen. All three men eagerly watch the woman on his mobile phone as she says ‘Am I doing it right?’ Such advertisements draw clear parallels between a woman eating and a woman servicing a man’s sexual needs, through the judicious use of porn codes.

DISCUSSION

This paper argues that the world of advertising provides an ideal opportunity to explore the age-old relationship between womanhood and carnality, a relationship that has been culturally reinscribed for contemporary consumption. Hopefully we have demonstrated how the ubiquitous and ancient narrative of woman as carnal ‘consummate consumer’ is as powerful and pervasive a myth as it ever was. This pre-modern myth has endured into our postmodern age, and perhaps this is not surprising. Fischer (2000) writes that premodernist, modernist and postmodernist texts, signs and signifiers co-exist in a multi-vocal world (p. 6). She also observes that this multi-vocality ensures that reconciliations and contradictions are the order of the day, with ‘liberatory’ postmodern discourses going hand in hand with ‘constraining’ modernist ones (p. 6). We would concur with her view, and conclude that this very much describes the TV advertisements we have discussed in this paper. We believe that the association of womanhood with carnality is one that we should problematise, as in so doing we acknowledge the complexities inherent in this narrative. In these so-called postfeminist, postmodern times, we are perhaps expected to join with the advertisers and laugh at ourselves, affirming our hopeless dependency on our bodily appetites, our sensual desires for luxurious shower and bath products, and our passionate addictions to all things that are bad for us, be it chocolate or other pleasures of the flesh (such as shower gel!) It is clear, however, that we could view this identification of women with uncontrollable appetites as, at the very least, a self-fulfilling prophecy and, at the worst, as a stereotypical construct that ensures women’s continued identification with the body, and their denigration because of this. On a more serious note, we might perhaps point to the work of Susie Orbach and Susan Bordo, and acknowledge that the revalidation of the body, and a focus on women’s subjectivity, is not necessarily experienced as a liberatory and playful phenomenon by women consumers. We might also mention one of many recent studies that have been conducted into women’s ‘self-images’ (Good Housekeeping, May 2007), which revealed that 84% of the 1000 UK women interviewed for the survey felt that they were under pressure to look attractive, 79% admitted that their mood affected their food choice, and 52% couldn’t socialize with others when they felt unattractive.

On a more optimistic note, we close by making mention of Dove’s controversial ‘Campaign for Real Beauty’. This highly publicized campaign famously uses ordinary women of all ages, body sizes and skin colours, to send out a message that beauty is too
narrowly defined in our culture. By affirming female sub-jectivity, the campaign recalls the positive benefits of ‘jouissance’ (joyful loving of oneself) associated with French feminist thought (Irigaray, 1985, 1993), and it also celebrates the carnivalesque, in its challenging of the notion of the grotesque female body and its affirmation of the female body in all its diversity of shapes, sizes, colours and life-cycle stages. At the very least, the Dove’s advertising campaign recognizes that women are not just bodily objects but bodily subjects (real women) and in so doing, the campaign presents a more positive and complex view of female embodiment in postmodern advertising texts, one that emphasizes carnal celebration rather than cerebral constraint, whilst not denying the complexities inherent in this dialectic. Above all, perhaps, advertising texts underline the plurality and multi-vocality of postmodern discourse, serving up a melange of pre-modern, modern and postmodern discourses to appeal to our increasingly complex palates.

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