Health Appeals in Television Food Advertising: A Social Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract

Lay beliefs about health generally, and health in relation to food in particular, are interesting and moderately researched topics. However, within these areas of study, little consideration has been given to the socially constructed nature of these so-called beliefs and values. Additionally, research that has explored the meaning and ideological significance of advertising has tended to do so in a static way, relying almost entirely upon the researcher's necessarily subjective analysis of print advertisements, while overlooking the active and constructive role of people in creating meaning. Based on the theoretical understanding that advertising, as a social and linguistic medium, both reproduces and creates cultural meanings, this study explores how the concept of health is appropriated in television advertisements for food products. In this way, the ideological implications of the meaningful relationships between health and food in modern consumer culture are elucidated.

Fourteen ads for food products, which made some appeal to health, were recorded from free to air television. These ads targeted either middle-class mothers or independent, working women. Two focus group discussions were conducted, employing women from each of the target consumer groups as participants. These groups are referred to as *mothers* and *singles* respectively. In the focus group discussions, participants viewed and talked about the ads. A semiotic deconstruction of each of the ads was also undertaken. This involved breaking down the sign systems operating in the ads, in order to identify the underlying cultural assumptions about food and health. Semiotic interpretations of ads were grounded in real-world lay readings produced by participants.

Drawing upon these interpretations, it is argued that for women, food and health discourses, particularly where they intersect, are sites of tension and contradiction, creating considerable food related anxiety and ambivalence. Appeals to health in food advertisements conflate health and beauty concerns to disguise and reinforce moral judgements based on body weight. Social constructions of the 'good mother', as evidenced in advertising, hold mothers responsible for the dietary health of children. At the same time, dominant nutritional science explanations of the relationship between health and food disempower women by privileging expert knowledge. Women are ideologically positioned through food and health discourses in oppressive ways characterised by irresolvable moral dilemmas. This study makes a clear social contribution by exposing the assumptions and myths underlying food and health meanings, and thereby laying them open to challenge.

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Contents

Introduction

Food and Health

Food plays a significant role in our everyday social interaction, to the extent that, in Lupton's (1996) view, food and eating practices are *always* mediated through social relations. For Lupton, food preferences cannot be separated from social contact. She argues that our very earliest experiences of eating are strongly associated with the physical and emotional experience of close human contact so that from the outset, food is imbued with complex social meanings (Lupton, 1996). Within the fields of sociology and anthropology, the cultural aspects of food consumption have been explored from diverse perspectives. The French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss studied what people ate and how different cultures prepared their food, through their myths, in order to identify the underlying structures of human thought. He saw food practices as having particular significance in epitomising the intersection between culture and nature. Levi-Strauss used the term 'cooking' to describe the transformation by humans of all cultural goods from their natural form. More literally than with other cultural forms, through cooking, food in its raw state is transformed into a cultural object, replete with social meanings (Levi-Strauss, 1969). The notion of 'cooking' has been employed widely in media and cultural studies' theory in examining how 'nature' and 'the natural' as concepts are appropriated in media representations.

As with all cultures, in modern Western society, food preferences are informed in complex ways involving the interplay of functional and sociocultural aspects. Importantly, "when we eat, we are not merely consuming nutrients... we are also 'consuming' *meanings* and *symbols*" (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, p. 51). In Western culture, there is a strong association between food and health, with health related concerns being a popular rationale for food choice. The strength of the perceived relationship between food and health is well established such that it has become a kind of common sense, apparent in how people talk about health. In Pill's (1983) study of Welsh working class mothers, amongst those mothers who accepted some degree of control over health, diet was the most frequently referenced factor seen to directly influence health. Although mothers who took a more fatalistic view of health were unlikely to view diet as relevant in the causation of illness, they still considered food important in maintaining health. Pill explains this apparent contradiction by suggesting that while these women viewed food as important for good health, they did not see it as causally related to illness. Calnan (1990) elaborates on this idea, suggesting that 'food' is viewed as an energy giving fuel with the emphasis on quantity, whereas 'diet', particularly the notion of 'a balanced diet', relates more to maintaining immunity from illness. Similarly, the notions of 'health' and 'illness' are not simple conceptual opposites, but embody fundamentally different, albeit related, spheres of meaning, so that people experiencing chronic illness or disability may nonetheless claim to be healthy (Blaxter, 1997).

Pill's study also provides a striking illustration of how culturally derived notions such as etiquette and tradition are influential in determining food choice in Western society. A number of respondent mothers defined good food as a 'cooked' meal consisting of roast meat, potatoes and vegetables with gravy. Calnan (1990) also found this meal structure to be of particular importance in lower class English women's descriptions of a 'proper' and a 'square' meal. In both studies, participants did not define the value of this meal in terms of nutritional content but described it as nourishing, filling and

satisfying; values that may relate to deprivation which historically has affected the British working class (Lupton, 1996). The significance of a 'cooked' meal is steeped in tradition and embodies working class values associated with the duty of the housewife to provide *enough* food as fuel for growing children and a husband engaged in heavy manual labour (Pill, 1983). Particular importance is attributed to meat as the definitive constituent of the 'cooked' meal. Meat is seen to symbolise virility and strength and epitomise the working class tradition in which wives provide for their families (Pill, 1983).

The salience of health concerns in relation to food and eating is related to the dominance of scientific and biomedical explanations of bodily experience broadly, leading to the widespread internalisation of the concerns of nutritional science (Lupton, 1996). Lupton (1996) provides an historical account of the emergence of nutritional science from the mid nineteenth century in Europe and America. Exploring the historical origins of a discourse in this way, serves to illustrate its constructed nature and challenge the appearance of timelessness, common sense or fact. Lupton (1996) breaks down the development of nutritional science into three phases, beginning with the accumulation of knowledge regarding the nutritional properties of food in the first phase; and moving towards widespread public education on issues of diet and health in the final phase. Lupton argues that as individual consumer behaviour surrounding food purchase and preparation became the target of state intervention, initially in response to the demands of modern mass warfare and later as a solution to chronic 'lifestyle' diseases, a highly internalised, moralistic and self-regulated construction of diet emerged:

"Not only was diet constructed as important for individuals' well-being, it became an issue for state regulation, as bodies became recognised as productive machines, vital to the military and economic interests of the state. Diet thus became a moral question, involving issues of an individual's capacity for self-control and work and the avoidance of waste and excess" (p.72).

The emergence of functional foods or nutraceuticals in recent years is exemplary of the confluence of health and dietary concerns. In the absence of any official definition, functional foods are generally considered to be foods that are marketed as having specific health promoting, disease preventing or medicinal properties beyond providing nutrients. For example, Flora Pro-activ is a margarine-like spread that is marketed in Australia as actively reducing cholesterol absorption when consumed daily. The treatment of food as medicine in this way is illustrative of the broader process of medicalisation, through which non-medical issues are defined and treated as medical concerns (Chamberlain, 2002; Lawrence & Germov, 2004). Medicalisation is a critical, rather than descriptively neutral term, that embodies an understanding of medicine as a powerful institution through which social problems are decontextualised and individualised under medical control (Conrad, 1992). In discussing degrees of medicalisation, Conrad distinguishes between conceptual medicalisation, where a problem is theorised in medical terms, and interactive medicalisation, which exists at the doctor-patient level in how solutions or 'treatments' are offered. While issues relating to food and nutrition are widely theorised in medical terms, food preparation and eating practices remain largely outside the realm of medicine, although as Chamberlain (2002) argues, the sites of intersection between food and medicine are increasing in frequency and complexity. Crawford's (1980) notion of healthism is useful for understanding the dissemination of medical ideology into cultural realms such as

food and eating. Crawford defines healthism as "the preoccupation with personal health as a primary focus for the definition and achievement of well-being; a goal which is to be attained primarily through the modification of life styles" (p. 368). As a form of medicalisation, healthism emphasises lifestyle and behavioural, rather than medical, causes and solutions (Conrad, 1992; Crawford, 1980) of illness. Although problems may be recognised as *partly* originating outside individuals, solutions are seen as a matter of personal choice (Crawford, 1980). For Crawford, the ideological and political consequences of healthism are far-reaching:

"the ideology of healthism fosters a continued depoliticization and therefore undermining of the social effort to improve health and well-being. As an ideology which promotes heightened health awareness, along with personal control and change, it may prove beneficial for those who adopt a more health-promoting life style. But it may in the process also serve the illusion that we can *as individuals* control our own existence, and that taking personal action to improve health will somehow satisfy the longing for a much more varied complex of needs" (p. 368).

Research exploring lay health beliefs confirms that health today is viewed primarily as a matter of individual control, to be achieved and maintained through engaging in health promoting behaviours such as exercise, and restricting unhealthy behaviours such as smoking and overeating. In Calnan's (1990) exploration of lay beliefs about food and health, both working class and middle class women emphasised behavioural influences over health such as diet, exercise, and tobacco and alcohol use. Similarly, in her review of both quantitative and qualitative research exploring lay theories of health and the causes of illness, Blaxter (1997) concluded that while behavioural explanations of health were pervasive, factors that are largely outside individual control were rarely mentioned. Sociocultural inequalities were articulated almost exclusively by more economically advantaged respondents. More recent research has documented the existence of more varied sociocultural explanations of health and illness amongst people of lower socio-economic status (SES) (Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2000, 2003). These studies found that while research participants resourced medical and lifestyle explanations of health, they also referred to the existence of social barriers such as a lack of time and money, that limited their ability to engage in health promoting behaviours. Participants also mentioned pervasive social-structural inequalities such as stress due to adverse material conditions including poor employment and housing, that predisposed them to illness.

Although socioeconomic factors influencing health may be increasingly recognised, and responsibility for health attributed at the state level, a moral obligation remains for individuals to actively pursue health. While participants in a study by Hodgetts and Chamberlain (2003) articulated concern with the increasing commodification of health services and advocated government responsibility for providing access to health care, they made a clear distinction between deserving and undeserving recipients of health care resources – those who are viewed as responsible for their own unhealth versus those who are seen to experience illness through no fault of their own. This position is dramatically exemplified in the following quote from a participant in the study:

"our hospitals are full of people because of drinking, motor vehicle accidents that cost a billion dollars a year and other unhealthy things that can be altered. People can eat more healthy foods, cut down on the smoking, cut down on the alcohol...If I was the chief surgeon at Greenlane Hospital I'd be ruling below the line all those with cirrhosis of the liver for alcoholism,

vascular surgery for feet going black because you're a heavy smoker... I'd make the list for those, I wouldn't give surgery to those who self cause the damage to their own bodies" (p. 564).

This argument disguises a moral judgement as an economic one. In appealing to the financial reality underlying healthcare as an in-demand resource, the speaker belies the complexity of the causes of illness and disease. In the process he distances himself from those who undermine their health by engaging in unhealthy behaviours and thereby legitimates his position as a moral and socially responsible individual, and a deserving recipient of public health services.

The moral dimension of health is revealed in how individuals construct and use moral meanings in talking about health and wellbeing. Middle class couples participating in Backett's (1992) study, tended to justify and apologise for aspects of their lives that might be construed as unhealthy, frequently referring to notions of conscience and guilt. Participants legitimated their engagement in non health-promoting behaviours by invoking wider socially endorsed obligations, such as familial duties, which took priority over personal health concerns and over which they felt they had little choice. Backett concludes that the characterisation of behaviours as healthy and unhealthy is closely linked to notions of good and bad, which can easily slip over into judgements of individuals as good and bad. Similarly, in Conrad's (1994) study, 'wellness seekers' articulated a morality of the body in categorising particular behaviours as either good or bad depending on the perceived impact of these behaviours upon health; eating, more than any other activity, was categorised in this way. A good diet constituted a fundamental aspect of well-being while eating bad food commonly lead to feelings of guilt (Conrad, 1994). Exercise was frequently used as a punishment or countermeasure for indulging in unhealthy food (Conrad, 1994).

Wellness is akin to virtue, and the pursuit of wellness embodies a pursuit for a good and virtuous life (Conrad, 1994). The moral obligations surrounding health are not easily negotiated, leading to anxiety as individuals struggle to position themselves as good in relation to health. The pursuit of wellness is concentrated upon the pursuit of a healthy diet, as this is the principal site where conscious control over health can be exercised (Coward, 1989). In Coward's (1989) view, food and its relation to health has displaced sexuality as the major source of anxiety about the body. Health is a goal to be deliberately achieved, resulting in self-blame and judgement of others. The body is taken as the social signifier of health but more importantly, due to the moral meanings attached to health, the body speaks outwardly of virtue and social worth. Thin bodies represent self-restraint and control while overweight bodies signify indulgence and a lack of self-control and motivation (Conrad, 1994).

While food has become a source of anxiety in Western society, it is also a vehicle of release and comfort. The dialectical nature of any account is revealed in that many of Crawford's (1984) participants expressed both views of health – as control and as release, or were contradictory in making arguments one way or the other. This dichotomy of meaning was also apparent in Crossley's (2002) study, which explored the lay health beliefs of elderly women. Participants simplified the issue of responsibility for health, debating the relative influence of a positive mental attitude and 'good' lifestyle, versus genes and luck. The following comment typifies the debate:

"We've got a fella up the road, swims, plays golf, doesn't smoke, hardly drinks, he's had a heart bypass, his father died at 52 of heart problems, and he's got it. And, think of Brian, overweight, smokes like a trooper, and no problem with his heart at all" (p. 1474).

Crossley also identified a third position, characterised by complex moral connotations, which she labelled 'rebellion'. This position, emphasising independence of thought and the pursuit of pleasure, emerged when positive attitude and lifestyle explanations were dominating, for example, when a 94 year old participant who was being exalted for her good health declared herself a chocoholic, eating two blocks a week. This admission of 'naughtiness' was affirmed by fellow participants, one of whom asserted "well it's good for your energy" (p. 1478).

More explicitly, participants in Backett's (1992) study incorporated notions of release into their definitions of health, asserting the centrality of balance and moderation to good health. Extreme lifestyles were disapproved of such that "being a 'health freak' [was regarded] as just as much of a taboo as regularly indulging in excessively unhealthy behaviours" (p.262). Good health was seen to stem from balance in all aspects of one's life, and food in particular was viewed as a pleasure, as well as a necessity.

For Crawford (1984), these oppositional meanings are inevitable, for such is the dialectical nature of discourse that while health is constructed to embody notions of self control, it must also entail notions of release. Crawford views the discourse of release as an adaptive response to a lack of control leading to a rejection of worry about health in the face of increasing medical advice about the risks of particular diets and lifestyles. According to this discourse, health is achieved through enjoyment of life without excessive worry and self-denial which are seen to negatively affect health. In Crawford's research, this position was expressed as cynicism regarding proliferating health warnings:

"you listen to the news and it says if you drink three cans of beer a day it is like smoking two packs of cigarettes. That is the new thing they have come out with now... it would cause fear in me if I thought that way. With that kind of thinking I'm going to be scared to death. And if I'm afraid and full of fear, I'm not going to be healthy" (p. 83).

Similarly, in Crossley's (2002) study, one participant justified not giving up smoking using fatalistic arguments such as "well we've all got to die sometime" (p. 1479) and "I would rather have a life that I'm enjoying" (p. 1480).

In making sense of such statements about health, it is important to consider the social context of the research setting and how the different actors, including the researcher, are positioned in relation to one another vis-à-vis the research question. Radley and Billig (1996) warn against assuming the existence of internalised and stable health beliefs that are outwardly expressed through talk:

"people do not merely have health beliefs, as they might have eggs carried in a shopping basket. They also construct their state of health as part of their ongoing identity in relation to others...accounts that are given of health and illness are more than a disclosing of a supposed internal attitude. In offering views, people are also making claims about themselves as worthy individuals, as more or less 'fit' participants in the activities of the social world." (p. 221)

In a society in which wellness and the pursuit of health is virtuous and good, outward disregard for the moral obligation to pursue health is met with social censure, in the face of which, transgressors will nonetheless seek to position themselves as worthy social participants. The discourse of release provides a rational justification and a moral 'out', for failure to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Those referencing this discourse may do so more to justify past behaviour than to determine a course of action based on already held beliefs. This is perhaps why those who adopted the release discourse in Crawford's study also appeared preoccupied with worry and unable to entirely relax in the face of overwhelming pressure.

At the heart of the contradiction between notions of health as control and health as release, Crawford (1984) situates the oppositional systems of production and consumption, with advertising being central to the perpetuation of the value of release associated with consumption.

"As in the soft drink ads that portray young, athletic bodies, one must consume and stay thin at the same time. The omnipresent command, "Eat!" is countered by the moral imperative to control eating. Indeed, food becomes a central metaphor for our dilemma. Indulgence in eating is infused with guilt while denial of food elicits the feeling of deprivation. Constant dieting engenders a persistent desire to "indulge one's appetite." Both feast and fast become images of health and disease" (p. 93).

Consideration of the forces of consumerism that are seen to drive the new health consciousness is not uncommon in explorations of modern conceptions of food and health. Crawford (1984) expresses astonishment at the extent to which health and fitness have been commercialised via advertising, "'health' and 'fitness' are being manufactured, the complex ideologies of health are picked up, magnified, and given commodity form by the image makers" (p. 76). Lupton (1994) continues this theme, exploring the meanings replete in exercise as a commodified, health promoting activity. She argues that engaging in exercise is not necessarily in the interests of health promotion, "people exercise because it is fashionable, because it is virtuous and ascetic, representing self-control and self-discipline, but also glamorous and sexy, involving form-fitting Lycra body-wear and expensive hi-tech shoes" (p. 113). An ostensible desire for good health is underpinned by powerful ideologies embedded in consumer culture (Lupton, 1994). In large part, these are the same ideologies that lend food its complex meanings. Through advertising, food is given cultural currency as healthy, convenient, safe, nutritious, natural, exotic and familiar. While food is necessary for biological functioning, the value of food is made complex in a society where food is abundant, and food choice vast.

This is not to deny that food has always had value extending beyond its nutritional and energy giving functions. Schudson (1984) argues that eating is (and has always been) a social and symbolic activity. Even in the most primitive of societies, food is imbued with social meanings

"For purposes of social analysis, the notion that there are basic biological needs that can be separated from artificial and created social needs does not make good sense. All needs are socially constructed in all human societies. What people require are the elements to live a social

life, the elements to be a person...This, of course, will differ from one society to another." (p. 132)

The notion of 'health' in its many complex guises, is increasingly used as an appealing concept in the marketing of diverse food products, but to what extent does this reflect heightened consumer concern with health? The functional food market alone has an estimated global value of US$50 billion and growing (Government of Canada, 2002), and clearly represents an attempt by food manufacturers to diversify and develop new product lines in order to gain market share in a highly competitive industry. Technological developments in food manufacturing and distribution processes, and changes in the social practices surrounding food consumption, have undoubtedly contributed to the emergence and growth of this market (Chamberlain, 2002). Manufacturers also cite growing consumer understanding of diet/disease links, aging populations, rising health care costs, and advances in nutritional science as contributing factors. While prolific concern with health in the development and marketing of food products is to some extent a response to consumer and social demands, the process is actually much less linear, and arguably, the key to success for producers is in creating, as well as satisfying demand.

It is clear that the mass media permeate our everyday lives widely and play a key role in shaping our understandings of health. This process is by no means uni-directional and before undertaking to determine the health related meanings that are circulated and created via the media, and advertising in particular, some understanding of the meaning making process must be attempted. In so doing, the value and importance of deconstructing media forms will also become apparent.

Health and the Mass Media

The portrayal of health related messages in the mass media has been most well researched in the field of health promotion, in which various media are treated as public health education tools. Research is typically concerned with measuring and improving the efficacy of media health campaigns in raising awareness and changing behaviours in relation to specific public health issues such as physical inactivity, sexual practices, sun exposure, AIDS, cardiovascular disease, drug use, alcohol consumption, smoking, and mental health. Great variability is reported in the efficacy of such campaigns and much literature has considered how mass media can be utilised more effectively to promote healthy behaviour (e.g. Lupton, 1994). Consequently a plethora of health persuasion models have been developed, with occasional attempts to synthesise findings and integrate models (e.g. Slater, 1999). This research is situated within the scientific tradition, and is concerned with objectively demonstrating the actual influence of media representations on the health related behaviour and attitudes of those who are exposed to the mass media. In theorising meaning as located in the message, which is itself a product of the sender; the role of the receiver is made passive and s/he is attributed little agency in the process of rendering the message meaningful.

Studies of the influence of mass media on non-targeted behaviour incorporate a somewhat more sophisticated understanding of the communication process in recognising that the meaning taken from a media text, by the receiver, is not simply a function of the producer's intentions. Topics of investigation have included the impact of media representations of suicide upon suicide rates (Stack, 2003); alcohol

advertising in relation to both problematic and non-problematic drinking (Casswell, 1995); and the effects of exposure to thin ideal images on subsequent self-perception and body satisfaction (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Summarising research regarding the harmful effects of mass media exposure on various adolescent health-related behaviours (including violence and aggression, healthy eating, sexual behaviour, and alcohol and tobacco use), Brown and Witherspoon (2002) conclude that while media representations are not solely responsible for causing unhealthy behaviour, they are generally a contributing factor. Unhealthy behaviours are over-represented and often glorified in popular media, while any negative consequences are omitted or glossed over. In these studies, the mass media are viewed as an influential source of information about social roles and values, although there is a tendency to perceive the media as malignantly powerful and in need of strict regulation.

Research into both the intended and unintended effects of exposure to health-related media representations has not typically included in-depth analysis of media representations in any meaningful sense. When representations are studied, the method of content analysis is generally employed and investigation is focused on the overt message. As an empirical method, content analysis is concerned with statistical issues such as significance and generalisability, and utilising a large and representative sample is key. As such, only manifest meanings can be given consideration as each representation is analysed very briefly in order to quantify chosen units. Connotative or deeper level meanings are not uncovered and no allowance is made for variations in how media messages are received and interpreted. The latter point is particularly important, for as Livingstone (1990) suggests, biases in the manifest content of mass media messages may not correspond to the meanings that are constructed by the audience.

As Lyons (2000) argues, in-depth examination of media representations of health is valuable in that lay theories of health and illness are developed from socially available discourses and constructions, which are both generated and reproduced through media representations. The emergent meanings are taken up by socially located individuals and used to mediate their lived experience. Analysis of a media text with an eye to identifying underlying themes and discourses, can reveal the meanings and ideologies which are therein reproduced, and which compete for dominance in the realm of social interaction (Lupton, 1992). An example of the application of this approach within the domain of health is Lupton's (1998) work on how HIV/AIDS and those with the virus are depicted in Australian news media and television drama:

"In Australian press reports of AIDS, the discourses and meanings drawn upon included comparing AIDS to the plague, drawing a binary opposition between 'innocent' and 'guilty' people with HIV/AIDS based on understandings about the extent to which they engaged in practices believed to be deviant, and employing military metaphors to describe the 'fight' or 'war' against AIDS" (p. 196).

In subsequent research, Lupton (1999) considers how representations of people with HIV/AIDS have changed over time, as the dominance of surrounding discourses has shifted. From a postmodern perspective, constructions of the world are social artefacts and any particular representation or pattern of representations is culturally and historically located (Gergen, 1985). Widely accepted constructions take on the appearance of truth, however the discourses that sustain these 'truths' are open to

challenge. The mass media are an important and pervasive site of social discourse. Critical and detailed analysis of media representations is necessary to uncover the ideological mechanisms of the text, thereby laying them open to challenge.

The Role of the Audience

While the mass communications media play an important role in circulating meanings socially, the meanings offered by any particular text are not taken up passively by the audience but are negotiated and interpreted in purposeful ways. In calling for the integration of media production and consumption research, Deacon (2003) reminds us that "mass audiences actually comprise a myriad of loosely configured and fluid 'interpretive communities' who bring different experiences, competences, solidarities, motivations and practices to their media consumption" (p. 213). In emphasising the structural relationships that give any message its meaning, the semiotic model of communication as articulated by Barthes (1973), views the reader as active in generating meaning, rather than as a passive receiver of a message in which specific meanings are already encoded. The terms *reader* and *text* are used to convey the active and constructive role of the person making sense of the message. Like reading, interpreting social communications is something that we learn to do, and the meanings that we read from any text are determined by our cultural experience (Fiske, 1987). Hall's (1980) reception theory provides a framework for thinking about how readers may take a negotiated or oppositional reading of a media text. While the preferred or dominant reading is encoded into a text in the process of production, the reader may not decode the text in the intended way. The reader may accept some of the intended dominant meaning, supplementing this with some alternative or oppositional meaning, or the reader may interpret the text in an entirely oppositional way, producing contrasting meanings to those intended. The extent to which a text is understood consistent with the producer's intentions depends upon the pre-existing social, cultural and experience-based meanings that are brought to the interpretation process. In this sense, the meanings encoded in a text when it is produced restrict, but do not determine, the meanings that the reader generates in response to the text.

In the field of health research, the active role of the reader in giving meaning to the media text is highlighted in a study by Hodgetts and Chamberlain (2002), which explored how media representations contribute to men's health-related opinions. The researchers analysed texts from individual interviews, focus group discussions and a television health documentary. The television documentary was seen to locate the solution to men's health problems in prompt medical intervention, and position individuals collectively as having responsibility for monitoring their health and taking appropriate action upon detection of abnormalities; no consideration was given to barriers to access to health care. Low socio-economic status (SES) male viewers of the documentary took a negotiated reading in that they accepted the educational thrust of the programme and praised it as a much needed attempt to raise awareness of men's health issues, but were at the same time critical of the absence of any discussion of sociocultural factors influencing men's willingness and ability to seek health-related advice and assistance. So although participants accepted, to a degree, the intended message of the documentary, some negotiated meanings were produced as participants saw the documentary message as incomplete and inconsistent with their experience-based understandings, and therefore did not entirely accept its

underlying message that individuals are wholly responsible for their own health maintenance.

The agency of the audience continues beyond the moment in which a text is decoded as the meanings taken from the text by the reader are put into social practice (Hall, 1980). Illustrative of this, a more recent study by Hodgetts and Chamberlain (2003), showed how media representations are taken up by individuals and used to structure personal narratives. This study was concerned with how documentary coverage of health care reform in New Zealand was appropriated and re-storied by lower SES viewers. Participants each viewed a health related documentary and partook in a subsequent focus group discussion. Throughout the discussion, participants drew upon the socio-cultural narratives presented in the documentary and combined these with their own personal stories and experiences, as well as other culturally available narratives to make sense of the dilemmas posed by health reforms. For Hodgetts and Chamberlain, television programmes are more than frameworks through which individuals render their experiences collectively meaningful. Their study showed how individuals contextualise media texts within their own lives to extend the meaning of the text beyond the frame of the medium.

In studying advertising as a specific textual form, the role of the audience in creating meaning has generally been overlooked. This is perhaps because advertisements are commonly thought to do most of their work at an unconscious level, as Beasley and Danesi (2002) comment, "the more the respondents are aware of the ad's subtext, the less effective will it be as a persuasive text. The power of the text lies in its ambiguity and dense connotative layering. An ad whose signifieds can be easily figured out works mainly on a denotative level, and its overall effect is thus minimal" (p. 143).

Semiotics is perhaps the most widely used approach to deconstructing advertising representations from a media/cultural studies point of view. Semiotics is concerned with how meaning is circulated socially through structures of communication (Fiske, 1987). Texts are not seen as containing meaning in any fixed sense, but as vehicles for the production and circulation of meaning (Fiske, 1987). The semiotic theory of Barthes (1973) in particular, attributes the reader an involved and specific role in the sense-making process. While semiotics is useful for unlocking the subtle and complex meanings of a text, practitioners of this approach have tended to overlook the role of the reader in creating meaning.

"semiotics can be criticized, however, for moving too easily between textual and social structures, and for ignoring the fact that, in practice, the connections between text and society can be made only through the addressee or reader. It is in the act or process of reading that text and society meet" (Fiske, 1987, p. 157).

The social context of reading is very important as meanings are produced only at the moment of reading, when the social situation of the reader is brought to bear upon the text. Semiotic analysis cannot draw out these idiosyncratic readings.

"The ways in which texts are used socially may not be apparent in the structure of the texts themselves and thus may not be available for textual analysis. Equally, some of the meanings of texts may not be revealed by a textual analysis because they are produced at the moment when

the text meets the social situation of the reader, and in this meeting the reader may bring unanticipated, non-textual factors to the process of making meaning" (Fiske, 1987, p. 159).

It is on this basis that Fiske argues the merits of an "ethno-semiotic" approach to the study of communication and meaning, which involves both observing communication in action and discussing the communication process with those involved. Such a method also promises to overcome another related weakness of the traditional application of semiotics - that the analytical readings produced are idiosyncratic and dependent upon the skill of the analyst. An unskilled practitioner "can do little more than state the obvious in a complex and often pretentious manner" (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1986, p. 165). One of the key contributions of the present study is the combination of critical academic analysis with real-world lay evaluations of media texts. By considering how media texts are actually read, the semiotic analysis of the text can be verified and tested for its resonance with the audience's interpretation. Further discussion can illuminate how the meanings taken up from the text function ideologically and fit into the existing frames of reference of the audience.

Advertising as Mass Communication

To understand the relevance and importance of advertising in late capitalist society, both the reach and role of advertising must be considered. Advertising is highly pervasive, invading almost every realm of public and private space - if not in a physical sense, then in an ideological sense, as spiritual, familial and personal values are appropriated in advertising for the purpose of selling. Advertising is encountered with such force and frequency that it is accepted as part of the 'background noise' of daily life. Our response to the relentless intrusion of the 'propaganda for products' is typically one of intellectual submission and any critical consideration of advertising is precluded (Pollay, 1986).

The function of advertising in capitalist society has been given widespread consideration, and critics of advertising have concentrated on its perceived negative social impact, leading Pollay (1986), in his review of literature concerning the social consequences of advertising, to comment on the "veritable absence of perceived positive influence" (p. 19). These arguments deserve consideration for what they allege about the value of a critical approach to advertising.

Advertising plays a fundamental role in the perpetuation and success of capitalism as an economic and social system. Under capitalism, the commodity reigns king; it is only through constant exchange – exchange of labour for money and exchange of money for goods and services – that the economic wheels of society are kept turning. In the face of gross over-production and decreasing material need, consumer demand must be promoted, and this is where advertising intercedes.

"It helps the manufacturer or business to secure a section of the market by organizing and controlling people's tastes and behaviour in the interests of company profit and capital growth. Advertising works not only on behalf of specific goods and services, it also assumes certain characteristics which are less directly connected to selling. It tries to manipulate people into buying a way of life as well as goods." (Dyer, 1982, p. 5).

Advertising is seen to play an integral role in perpetuating economic stability and growth through creating false needs or 'pseudo-needs', and espousing consumerism as a catch-all solution (see Leiss et al., 1986). In conferring social and symbolic significance upon goods, advertising creates and defines consumers (Leiss et al., 1986). Defenders of advertising do not see it as creating false needs, but as tapping into existing needs in new ways. At the heart of this debate is the question of whether advertising mirrors or creates social values. In Fowles' (1996) view, this debate is misguided as it oversimplifies the relationship between advertising imagery and social values:

"advertisers respond to vague preferences with certain specific figurations that settle back into consciousness to both reify and vary standards of attractiveness. Advertising does not, and cannot, create these stereotypes from sources that exclude the public, nor does advertising passively mirror stereotypes; it is actively involved in the dialectical process of making and remaking them" (p. 160).

From a structural perspective, in order for advertising to be intelligible, the systems of meaning that advertising draws upon must already circulate socially, and the needs that are appealed to must exist outside the frame of the advertisement. However the association of these meanings with the advertised commodity is arbitrary and unnatural. Through advertising, inert products are imbued with social meanings and the use of goods becomes tied up with their symbolic rather than use values. For example, in advertisements, hairlessness is constructed as desirable for women in support of the sale of a range of products including shavers, hot wax, depilatory creams and pantyhose. Advertisements for such products typically dissect and fetishise the female body, and construct the removal of body hair as synonymous with beauty, refinement and sexual power. The visible absence of body hair has gained widespread recognition as a signifier of female sexuality in Western culture and the price for non-compliance is high; women with hairy legs or armpits are viewed as sexually deviant or butch – a term which carries negative connotation in relation to what it does *not* signify i.e. heterosexual femininity. The same process is apparent in the formation of the cultural rules that determine what is healthy/unhealthy. As with the marketing of beauty products, advertising plays a key role in the formation of cultural understandings of health and healthy as desirable, regardless of the fact that the product being sold, food, has a clear functional value. The current proliferation of beauty products for men, and the emergence of the 'metrosexual', provides a contemporary example of how advertising is active in defining gender identities and rituals.

Through advertising material objects, such as pantyhose, are transformed into social signifiers (Leiss et al., 1986) and conveyers of meaning. In the case of pantyhose, the meaning conveyed might be something like 'empowered femininity', but for other products the signified - what is being referred to - might be 'timeless prestige', 'youthful rebellion', 'family cohesion' or 'off-beat individuality'. Over time, the associations created in ads come to appear natural – this is the ideological function of advertising. While this function is not unique to advertising, as an institution advertising is uniquely powerful in that it espouses the interests of an elite and well-resourced few with access to all channels of mass communication (Dyer, 1982). In Dyer's view, because the desires created through advertising are determined by the demands of the system of production with little concern for actual social or individual needs, commodity

consumption is incompatible with the fulfilment of real human needs. Advertising merely attempts to "conceal or compensate for the deficiencies in a person's real social and personal life" (p. 81), as the needs that are appealed to in advertising, such as self-respect, security, affiliation, autonomy, prominence and attention, are not well met through acts of consumption.

Advertising would have us believe that there is no problem that cannot be solved through consumption – it is the catch-all solution that promises instant results with little effort. In this sense, advertising has been described as a kind of modern day magic, "a highly organized and professional system of magical inducements and satisfactions... strangely co-existent with highly developed scientific technology" (Williams, 1980, p. 185). For Williamson (1978), there is a straightforward congruency between science and magic as played out in advertising, "electricity and the electrical media have made the 'instant' quality of magic come true: immediacy and fast results are no longer the province of witchcraft and sorcery" (p. 142). In Williamson's (1978) view, the magical inducements of advertising function ideologically to obscure the actual systems of production in society by misrepresenting purchase and consumption as production. "Magic is the production of results disproportionate to the effort put in (a transformation of power – or of impotence *into* power)... all consumer products offer magic, and all advertisements are spells" (p. 141). Through the act of consumption, the product replaces us in producing the magic result – beauty, sex appeal, sophistication, coolness, etc. Leiss and his colleagues (Leiss et al., 1986) argue that while people are magically transformed in ads, so are goods, which are literally brought to life as singing, dancing versions of themselves. In ads, our need for meaning is exploited as human needs and desires are transferred onto products (Beasley & Danesi, 2002). In this exchange people are made to become the products which they consume. "Advertising's imagery and symbolism replaces "real" people with artificial 'types' and situations, and thus turns people into *things*, purchasable and exchangeable in the marketplace" (Leiss et al., 1986, p. 24).

Ads are concerned primarily with representations of the ideal – they create fantasy worlds that are non-threatening, simple, interesting, embracing and colourful. The people featured in ads are self-interested gender paragons, devoid of class markers, employment and social locus (Fowles, 1996). The exhortations of advertising take on a religious quality as "the advertiser has... taken over the role of the preacher, promulgating the good news and the constant need to improve oneself" (Beasley & Danesi, 2002,p. 147). Adopting a moral stance, some critics of advertising have expressed concern over the replacement of religious values such as humility, self-control, reverence and grace, with consumer values such as pride, self-indulgence, hedonistic pursuit, greed and materialism (Pollay, 1986). Advertising images are also seen as contributing to the moral breakdown of society and as promoting misleading or negative stereotypes and impossible role models. Beasley and Danesi (2002) argue that these advertising images are influential in shaping our cultural world-view as reflected in the juvenilisation (preoccupation with youthfulness) of Western culture.

"A society bombarded incessantly by advertising images is bound to become more and more susceptible to the effects of extreme forms of objectification. Because our consciousness is shaped by the type of stimuli and information to which we are exposed, the barrage of images generated by advertisements surreptitiously influence life-style and behavior, especially the

perception of how many desirable material objects we should own and of how many pleasures we should be feeling" (p. 147).

For Jib Fowles (1996) the use of particular representations in advertising imagery is straight-forward; ads feature attractive young women because that is what people like to look at; "images of people as they are 'in society today' will draw no more attention in advertising than do average people in the real world, whereas highly stylized paragons will attract the same fascinated gazes they would if they were spotted walking down any street in America" (p. 153). Fowles rethinks power relations between consumers and advertisers and argues that consumers are ultimately the ones with power (the power to buy). Employing Hall's (1980) model of audience reception, Fowles illustrates the complex ways in which ads are decoded by readers who elaborate ad meanings using personal experience, and often completely misconstrue advertisements.

"Advertising is a buffet of symbolic imagery that advertisers hope will prove tempting and lead to the more difficult exchange of money for goods. Consumers pass down the table of displayed appeals, glancing here and there, but stop only infrequently to oblige a felt inner need for a symbol and a product – and to buy. It is their favor that advertisers are assiduously courting" (p.164).

In Fowles' (1996) view, it is consumers who exploit advertising. He argues that advertising is used by consumers to serve their own needs and gratifications, while the sales message is largely disregarded. While this argument rightly recognises the role of the reader in bringing meaning to the ad text, it misconceives the function of ads as being solely measurable in product sales. The ostensible advertising message to 'buy this product' is of least concern, and while readers readily ignore or reject this instruction they may nonetheless buy into the consumer ethos. In Pollay's (1986) words, "the intent of advertising, especially in the aggregate, is to preoccupy society with material concerns, seeing commercially available goods or services as the path to happiness and the solution to virtually all problems and needs" (p. 21).

Leiss and his colleagues (Leiss et al., 1986) warn against mistaking critiques of society for critiques of advertising, and admittedly, concern with the social consequences of the consumer mentality is fundamental to many of the arguments outlined above. However, the distinction is not easily made, as advertising is so embedded in modern consumer culture that it is difficult to separate from the social context in which it operates. The concerns of advertising pervade other textual forms, as advertising is a major source of revenue across media. As Cook (1992) notes, "while programme producers do not even see the ads which punctuate their shows, advertising agencies can buy space in specific programmes, and exercise considerable control over the interaction of one discourse with another" (p. 31). Moreover, the commercial imperative to attract advertisers undoubtedly influences the content of television, newspaper, magazine and radio media. For example, during the May 13, 2003 broadcast of Today (an early morning news and lifestyle show broadcast live daily on Australia's channel Nine), an advertisement for Weetbix (a wheat based breakfast cereal), aired immediately prior to a consumer oriented article comparing the nutritional content of various breakfast cereals. The 'shocking finding' was reported that many cereals marketed to children are high in sugar and salt, and low in fibre, with Weetbix being a notable exception. While it is more likely that the ad placement was determined by the program content than vice-versa, the point is that commercial values

pervade television programming that is aimed at securing a large or specific audience segment in order to sell advertising space at a premium. It is an indication of the omnipresence of consumer values in modern culture that this story was deemed newsworthy such that it featured in the prime-time news of all Australia's commercial television stations that night alongside 'the war in Iraq'.

In thinking about advertising as a site for the circulation and creation of meaning, it is not necessary or desirable, to separate it from society. Like all textual forms, advertising does not stand apart from the culture that gives it meaning. The aim of deconstructing advertising is to come to some understanding of its ideological underpinnings, which is to take a critical approach to society.

A Final Note on Medium and Form

Approximately 99% of Australian households have a television set and in 2002, television advertising spending in Australia equated to approximately half of total advertising expenditure (Nielsen Media Research, 2003). It is also estimated that in a lifetime, the average American watches three years' worth of television commercials (Danesi, 2002). Clearly a critical focus on television advertising is warranted; however, most previous critical discussion of advertising representations has utilised print forms (the respective works of Dyer (1982) and Cook (1992) are notable exceptions). This may be primarily due to the relative ease of studying static, 'image and text' ads, over dynamic, visual-auditory television ads. Print advertisements are also easier to reproduce. As any media text is interpreted in varying ways, reproducing the advertisement to accompany the analyst's interpretation is valuable, both to support the analyst's arguments and to allow the reader to form their own conclusions. With modern, widely available digital recording technology, the television advertisement has become more amenable to deconstruction and reproduction.

Every medium is constrained by the channels it utilises as "different media... provide different frameworks for representing experience, facilitating some forms of expression and inhibiting others" (Chandler, 2002, p. 3). Different constraints apply to advertising in the televisual form which utilises auditory and visual channels in a dynamic way, than in the print form which utilises the static visual channel only. As readers, we also engage differently with these different media. Print advertising, appearing most often in magazines and newspapers, requires the intimate and selective engagement of the reader, whereas television commercials are broadcast with much less discretion. TV ads aggressively pursue a broad audience, and cannot be so easily shut out or put aside as their print counterparts. These differences between media necessitate the study of the advertising form in different media.

Advertising is not itself a medium. Advertising has a recognisable form across media that is underpinned by structured codes. As a conventionalised textual form, it more closely approximates a genre, although no genre transcends such a broad range of media (magazines, television, newsprint, billboards, film, radio, posters, junk-mail, t-shirts etc) as advertising. This is not inconsistent with Cook's (1992) view of advertising as a type of discourse. In comparing advertisements with literature, Cook emphasises the linguistic aspects of advertising, including elements such as images and music. In Goldman's (1992) view, the formal conventions of advertising play a critical role in delivering the meaning of the ad. Alluding to the mortise and tenon

system of joining carpentry materials, Goldman describes the 'mortise and frame' that characterises the print ad form. In this context, the mortise is a boxed insert, frequently depicting the product, that works to connect the product and image. As a formal device that we learn through exposure to advertising systems, the mortise effectively steers the reader to interpret the ad in particular ways consistent with the advertiser's intentions. Similarly, through its overall frame, the ad signals itself as an ad and alerts the reader to the rules of decoding. Other formal conventions are used in television ads, many coming from television and film-making, and some of these will be explored in the course of this study.

The Present Study

The present study explores how 'health' is appropriated in television advertisements for food products. The over-arching aim is to develop understandings of the meaning of health in relation to food, eating and related practices in modern consumer culture, in the process laying open to challenge the ideological basis of these meanings.

To this end, the key aims of this study are:

- to contribute to the body of research that considers how socially shared meanings and values are reproduced and formed through cultural texts such as the media, and how in referencing these meanings, people are both active and constructive. While lay beliefs about health generally, and health in relation to food in particular, are interesting and moderately researched topics, it is only recently that constructivist approaches have found a place within this field;
- to combine critical academic analysis and real-world lay evaluations of advertising texts thus overcoming a traditional reliance upon the researcher's necessarily subjective interpretation and at the same time recognising the active role of the reader in creating meaning;
- to critically consider advertising in the televisual form;
- to uncover and open up to challenge the ideologies offered through advertising in relation to food and health.

In order to provide a basic understanding of semiotic theory, which informs the textual analysis undertaken in this study, a brief chapter outlining some of the key concepts of semiotics and the application of this theory to the study of advertising is presented next. The specific application of semiotics in this study is detailed in the Method section.

Semiotics

An Overview

Semiotics (or semiology) is the study of signs. The Swiss linguist, Ferdinand De Saussure, is generally regarded as the founder of semiotics, although the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce, is also considered a key figure in the early development of the field. As Eco (1976) notes, semiotics is not a well-defined and coherent academic discipline, but a field of study informed by various theoretical perspectives and methodologies. Chandler (2002) laments that "beyond the most basic definition, there is considerable variation amongst leading semioticians as to what semiotics involves. It is not only concerned with (intentional) communication but also with our ascription of significance to anything in the world" (p. 5). Semiotics has been very broadly, and not always appropriately applied, and for this reason, it has been criticised as imperialistic (Chandler, 2002).

Semiotics is closely tied up with structuralism which is concerned with the organisation of, and relationship between, units within systems of meaning such as language. Although semiotics emerged from linguistic analysis, it has been effectively adapted to the study of imagistic signs. Roland Barthes was particularly influential in developing semiotics as a major approach to cultural studies in the late 1960s (Chandler, 2002). Since then, semiotics has been widely applied to the study of popular culture and advertising in particular.

In response to early criticisms that semiotics privileges structure over process, semiotic theory has evolved to give greater consideration to the social context in which texts are interpreted. Modern semiotic theory sits comfortably with social constructionist ideas about the nature of reality and knowledge. By understanding reality as a system of signs, we begin to see how it is constructed and the human agency involved.

Semiotics is valuable not only because it challenges the notion that there exists an objective and independent reality, but because it provides a means with which to break down and challenge dominant constructions of reality. Semiotics emphasises the agency of people in constructing meaning. Messages are not seen as naturally containing meaning, instead meaning is achieved through the interpretation of messages in accordance with taken for granted codes and conventions. Meaning is not entirely subjective but is socially defined and realities are contested through textual representations (Chandler, 2002). Semiotics is not concerned with establishing the truth of representations, but with identifying and challenging those versions of reality that are represented as truth.

Before discussing the application of semiotics to the study of advertising, some coverage of key theoretical concepts is warranted.

Key Concepts

Sign: signifier and signified

Within semiotics, signs are that which represent something else and can take a multitude of forms, vastly more numerous than what we conventionally regard as a sign. In theory, a sign is divided into two components: the *signifier* and the *signified.* The signifier is the physical form of the sign; the signified is the abstract concept

referred to by the signifier. The signified is not a physical thing that exists in the material world to which the signifier simply points; many if not most signifieds have no physical form and exist only on a conceptual level e.g. 'love', 'history' and 'culture'. The concreteness of the signified becomes irrelevant when we consider that concepts do not precede the signs (usually linguistic) with which we refer to them. Moreover, there is no simple one to one relationship between the signifier and signified, as a sign has different meanings for different people, depending on their individual and cultural experience, and depending on the context of reading. The relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary, meaning that there is no natural correlation between the physical form of a sign and its meaning. This is perhaps most apparent in language, where in different languages a similar concept is referred to using a different word. For example, the signifier 'dog' in English refers to a particular species of four legged, domestic animal. In French, the signifier is 'chien', although the signified is more or less the same as in English. There is nothing inherent in the animal being referred to that corresponds with 'dog' or 'chien'. There are, however, different degrees of arbitrariness and this aspect of signs is referred to as *motivation*. Iconic signs, for which the signifier resembles the signified (e.g. a picture of a dog referring to the concept 'dog') are said to be motivated. Whereas purely symbolic signs have no logical connection between signifier and signified (e.g. a rose is a symbol of love), and are described as unmotivated.

Although there is a theoretical distinction between signifier and signified, in practice the sign is always whole and the two parts are inseparable. Nonetheless, the theoretical separation of the two parts has proven very useful in understanding the social circulation and production of meaning through signs (Chandler, 2002).

Denotation and Connotation: levels of meaning

Textual interpretation occurs on several levels. The surface level is referred to as the denotative level and consists of what is readily observable such as images, text, layout, speech, colour and so on. The connotative or underlying level consists of those meanings that lie beyond what is clearly apparent. Connotation depends upon the reader's knowledge of the culturally located meanings to which a signifier refers. Judith Williamson (1978) uses the example of Catherine Deneuve, whose image in the context of an ad for Chanel No. 5 perfume connotes French chic, glamour and beauty.

It is widely argued that no real distinction can be made between denotation and connotation. In the words of Barthes (1973) "denotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so. Under this illusion, it is ultimately not more than the last of the connotations...the superior myth by which the text pretends to return the nature of language, to language as nature" (p. 9). Denotation, then, refers to the most widely agreed upon, 'common sense' meaning of a sign. While denotation appears natural it is actually dependent upon the cultural experience and knowledge of the reader. As such, denotation is the first level of connotation and subsequent levels are increasingly polysemic, involving the subjective interpretation of individual readers. This is not to say that the connotative value of a sign is entirely subjective. Even at a connotative level there will be much agreement between members of the same culture as to the meaning of a sign.

For analytical purposes it is useful to distinguish between denotation and connotation, as denotation provides a critical starting point and a basis from which to elaborate connotative meanings.

Paradigms and Syntagms: differences between signs

Saussure (1983) emphasised that meaning is apparent in the differences between signs. Only by examining the structure of the text can the meaning of a sign be determined in relation to the systems it inhabits. Saussure defined two distinct structural relationships between signs, concerning the relationship of a sign to other signs within the same text (syntagmatic), and to other signs external to the text (paradigmatic – although Saussure used the term associative).

A paradigm is "a *set* of associated signifiers or signifieds which are all members of some defining category, but in which each is significantly different" (Chandler, 2002, p. 80). According to Gillian Dyer (1982) "a sign is in a paradigmatic relation with all the signs which can also occur in the same context but not at the same time" (p. 127). She uses the example of a stallion in a Marlboro ad and defines the associated paradigm as "all functionally similar objects: ponies, donkeys, mules, dray horses, foals, mares, etc." (p. 127). Each signifier within the paradigm is structurally interchangeable with all others and each has meaning in relation to the others in terms of what it is not. The use of one signifier over others in the same paradigm steers the reader toward the preferred interpretation of the text in a process known as ideological closure (Chandler, 2002; Underwood, 2003). In the case of the Marlboro ad, the stallion has connotations of freedom, masculinity, virility, wildness and individuality (Dyer, 1982).

Drawing on Dyer's example, Underwood (2003) expresses concern over the difficulty of defining any particular paradigm and determining what constitutes membership of that paradigm. These concerns are largely unwarranted as in practice the aim of paradigmatic analysis is not to formulate an exhaustive set of paradigm members, but to determine the unique meanings of a sign through consideration of how it differs from functionally related signs. As a conceptual map, a paradigm has no sensible boundaries and any listing of those signs constituting a particular paradigm will never be exhaustive. Nor is it necessary to assume a uni-dimensional paradigm set, as the relationship of a sign within a text to other signs outside the text involves many categories at once. When understood in this way, paradigmatic analysis remains a useful theoretical tool for elaborating the connotative meanings of a sign.

The term syntagm refers to the relationship that a sign has with other signs within the text. Chandler (2002) defines a syntagm as "an orderly combination of interacting signifiers which forms a meaningful whole within a text" (p. 81). Language provides an everyday example of the syntagmatic relationship between signs. A sentence is a syntagm of word signs, the construction of which is governed by the rules of syntax and grammar. Syntagms operate on many levels within any text so that each syntagm may be part of a larger syntagm, just as a sentence is part of a paragraph. Syntagms in audio-visual media such as television are both temporal and spatial. Temporally, a syntagm may consist of a series of shot selections, whereas the composition of a specific shot forms a spatial syntagm.

Syntagmatic analysis focuses on the contextual relationship between signs within a text. "The study of syntagmatic relations reveals the conventions or 'rules of combination' underlying the production and interpretation of texts" (Chandler, 2002, p. 84). These 'rules of combination' form the structural basis of codes.

Codes: systems of communication

Codes are systems of communication, the rules of which are agreed upon by all members of a culture using the code. Chandler (2002) defines a code as "a set of practices familiar to users of the medium operating within a broad cultural framework" (p. 147). Signs within a code are recognised to have a specific meaning so that a code operates as a semiotic heuristic to simplify the communication process. Codes are social in nature as communication is only possible through codes. In Fiske's (1987) words,

> "'reality' is always encoded, or rather the only way we can perceive and make sense of reality is by the codes of our culture. There may be an objective, empiricist reality out there, but there is no universal, objective way of perceiving and making sense of it. What passes for reality in any culture is the product of the culture's codes, so 'reality' is always already encoded, it is never 'raw'" (p. 4).

If the relevant codes are not known by the receiver of a message, decoding may be impossible, as in the case of trying to understand a foreign language. Alternatively, aberrant decoding may occur when a code is misunderstood and the message is interpreted incorrectly.

Even the most apparently realistic texts require cultural knowledge for decoding. For example, in order to understand photography we must learn to interpret photographic conventions relating to framing, lighting, colour, focus and the representation of depth. The interpretation of film and television texts requires knowledge of more complex codes. In addition to understanding photographic codes, decoding film texts requires an understanding of the conventions of continuity editing, costume, shot selection, sound, narrative, camera movement etc.

Various taxonomies of codes have been proposed by semiotic theorists. For example, Fiske (1987) describes analogue (continuous) and digital (discrete) codes, presentational codes, elaborated and restricted codes, broadcast and narrowcast codes, arbitrary codes and aesthetic codes. Beyond highlighting the variability of codes these distinctions are not considered useful for the purposes of the present study, which is more concerned with uncovering than categorising codes.

Semiotics and the Study of Advertising

Advertising, as it is commonly understood, has a relatively short history of some 100 years although is has evolved greatly over this time. Dyer (1982) provides a detailed account of the history of advertising, noting that historically "advertising was a relatively straightforward means of announcement and communication and was used mainly to promote novelties and fringe products" (p. 39). Changes in manufacture and distribution processes have seen advertising become not only more widespread, but more persuasive and less informative in terms of providing technical product information. Advertisements have also increased in complexity as audiences have

grown savvier. For example, Goldman (1992) comments on the emergence of 'not ads' in which the meaning of the visual image is opaque and ambiguous, and the sales message invisible. Leiss and his colleagues (1986) argue that as advertising images have become increasingly visual and ambiguous, a systematic and sensitive method, such as semiotics, is needed to decode these complex message structures.

The application of semiotics to the study of advertising texts is both appropriate and useful, as advertisers are primarily concerned with developing and attaching elaborate chains of meaning to products. As Beasley and Danesi (2002) note:

"the work of the advertiser and marketer is, fundamentally, the work of the semiotician. Since consumers can choose from a huge variety of products and services, the process of ascertaining what signification system will make products and services attractive to customers has become a crucial one in today's marketplace. Marketers are involved, in effect, more in *selling signs* than in selling products" (p. 151).

The representations offered in ads are frequently misleading and stereotypical and advertising has been widely criticised on this basis. As Williamson (1978) notes "such a criticism... is based on the assumption that ads are merely the invisible conveyors of certain undesirable messages, and only sees meaning in the overt 'content' of the ad rather than its 'form'" (p. 17). Dyer (1982) also questions the relationship between reality and its depiction in advertising:

"ads are not secondary to 'real life' nor copied or derived from it. Ads... produce meanings which cannot be found in reality. There is no simple reality with which to replace the falseness of ads" (p. 114).

In their respective commentaries on the ideological function of advertising, both Williamson (1978) and Dyer (1982) emphasise that in order to determine what ads mean, we must ask *how* they mean. Semiotics assumes that it is through the formal structure of the text that meaning is generated. Dyer goes on to define the meaning of advertisements in terms of sign systems and signifying processes. The audience is attributed an active role in the production of meaning.

"Ads are not invisible conveyors of messages or transparent reflections of reality, they are specific discourses or structures of signs. As such we do not passively absorb them but actively participate in their production of signification, according to the way they 'speak' to or 'ensnare' us. We come to advertisements as social readers" (p. 115).

Based on the work of Williamson on the semiotic decoding of print ads, Leiss et al. (1986) describe a three step process through which ads (or rather products within ads) are made to mean. While this process is formulated in steps, the whole process actually occurs at once and all steps are interdependent. In the first step, meaning is transferred from one sign to another via the codes through which the reader interprets the text. Second, the transfer of meaning is completed by the reader who applies their cultural knowledge of the value of the first sign. Finally, the first sign must already mean something to the reader in order that its meaning be transferred.

This process can be illustrated with a rare example of the analysis of television advertising provided by Dyer (1982). Dyer considers a commercial for Renault cars

which borrows meaning through the overlay and juxtaposition of various images of women with the advertised car. Dyer describes the opening sequence of the commercial:

"The woman is made synonymous with the car through the shiny dress she is wearing and through its colours, and in addition through the formal techniques of cinematic dissolves and the montage of images. The silk-clad, slinky, fashionable model lies in a sensuous horizontal position in the first frame of the commercial. Her image dissolves slowly into the image of a car in the next few frames, the curves of her body forming the outline of the car" (p. 120)

The viewer of this commercial recognises the model as signifying female sexuality, beauty, desire, refinement and style. On another connotative level, the model is positioned as the subject of the male gaze through her passive and suggestive pose, and meanings relating to male power, control and virility emerge (Dyer, 1982). All of these meanings are transferred by the reader to the car according to the formal correlations that are made in the ad between car and woman through the use of colour, texture and editing.

Having introduced the key concepts of semiotics and shown how semiotic theory has been, and can be, applied to the study of advertising, in the next section, I will explain how semiotic theory was applied in this study, after first describing the nature of the data used (including advertisements and focus group transcripts) and how it was generated.

Method

Advertisements

Ads were recorded during April and May 2003 from free to air television broadcasters in Sydney, Australia. Ads of interest were those that featured a food product (excluding dietary supplements, weight loss products, vitamins and similar products), and made some appeal to health. Twenty ads were initially collected. In the process of collecting ads it became clear that middle-class mothers and single women were typically the target consumers of these ads and only those ads which targeted either of these two groups and which made the strongest health appeals were retained.

Selected advertisements targeted at single women included Healthy Choice and Lean Cuisine (both pre-prepared frozen meals), So Good (soy milk), Special K (corn based breakfast cereal), Nestle All Natural and Yoplait Lite (both reduced fat yoghurts), Yakult and Yoplait Optimal (both probiotic milk drinks). Advertisements targeted at mothers included Nutella (hazelnut spread), LCMs (snack bars), Flora Pro-activ (cholesterol reducing margarine), Weetbix and Nutri-Grain (both wheat based breakfast cereals), Wonder White (fibre enriched white bread), and Yakult (probiotic milk drink). The Yakult ad was included for both groups as it targeted women generally and did not target either demographic specifically. All ads are included, in digital format, on the accompanying CD.

While 14 ads in total were shown to participants, two were subsequently dropped from analysis – the Nestle All Natural and Flora Pro-activ commercials. The Nestle All Natural ad was a shortened version of the original, and due to the delay of ten months between recording the ad and conducting the focus group session, participants were not able to clearly recall the original full-length ad in order to make sense of the shortened version. These issues also limit the validity of a semiotic deconstruction of the ad which is not meant to stand alone but to be understood in relation to the full-length version. The Flora Pro-activ ad was dropped because participants did not feel that it targeted them, but that it was aimed at older people. Having positioned themselves in relation to the ad this way, participants then dismissed the product as something that they would not use.

Participants

Two focus group discussions were conducted, one employing mothers as participants and the other, women without children. For ease the two groups are referred to as *mothers* and *singles*. These terms are necessarily over-simplified and do not reflect the many differences and similarities within and between groups.

Participants were sourced through personal contacts, and at least one participant in each group was known to me as a friend. In both groups, participants all knew one another. Sampling pre-existing social networks was intended to facilitate open and relaxed discussion.

Five women, Kelly, Alicia, Sue, Angela and Kate, participated in the mothers focus group. They ranged in age between 30 and 38 years, and knew each other through a playgroup which their children attended. All participants in this group were married, middle-class, Caucasian, full-time mothers with at least one child under the age of five years. The discussion was held in Kelly's home as the participant most familiar to me.

Four friends, Jane, Gina, Sharon and Beth, aged between 29 and 35, participated in the singles focus group. All participants were middle-class, Caucasian and employed full-time. None had children and none were married although one was engaged and one was in a long term relationship. I personally knew two participants, Jane and Gina, and the discussion took place in Jane's home.

Focus Group Discussions

As Wilkinson argues (1998), focus group discussions are good for eliciting "participants' own meanings". Focus groups may facilitate openness and disclosure as participants question, contradict and challenge one another in ways that may be considered inappropriate coming from a researcher in an interview format (Wilkinson, 1998). The focus group setting also provides a social context for observing the interactive and collaborative processes through which meaning is co-constructed (Wilkinson, 1998). Furthermore, highly elaborate accounts can be produced as participants agree and disagree with one another (Wilkinson, 1998). While Lupton (1995) warns that participants may be reluctant to talk openly about their opinions and experiences in a group context, given the relatively benign subject matter of this study, this did not seem to be a problem.

The focus group discussions took a fairly unstructured format. A set of questions (see Appendix A) was developed so that the direction of conversation could be monitored to ensure all topics of interest were covered. For the most part, these questions were not specifically asked as many of the listed topics were covered by participants in the natural course of conversation. My involvement in the discussions was minimal and generally restricted to explaining the aims and methodology of the study, clarifying or affirming participants' comments and redirecting discussion when it digressed significantly (which was rarely as participants were remarkably diligent in monitoring the direct relevance of conversation to what they perceived as the research question).

For both groups, all ads were viewed at the beginning of the session and reviewed individually during the session. This structure meant that although participants mostly followed their own agendas, conversation was naturally focused around the advertisements as they were viewed throughout the sessions. Both focus groups ran for approximately 1 hour 40 minutes. At the end of each session, participants were given a movie voucher as a token of thanks for participating. The sessions were video taped and transcribed. In writing up the findings, the names of participants have been changed in order to preserve confidentiality. When quoting extracts of conversation from the focus group discussions, I have tried to present this in a way that is easy to read. Ellipses (...) are used to indicate where speakers' turns overlap, and the tilde sign (~) is used to show where sections of conversation have been omitted.

Focus groups were conducted in participants' homes and the host participant naturally took on a hosting role. Both groups treated the focus group discussion not as a rigid research setting but as a social gathering, characterised by the sharing of food and drink. This helped to create a natural setting in which to promote authentic discussion and is not seen as compromising the research in any way. This said, participants remained aware of the research agenda and approached the experience with a very helpful attitude. Some participants expressed discomfort at being video recorded and in both groups participants commented on the presence of the camera.

The analysis integrated two data sets; the advertisements themselves and the transcribed data generated in the focus group discussions. Data were analysed using the social semiotic approach described next.

The Analytic Method

Prior to the focus group discussions, ads were cursorily analysed using semiotic theory and methods. These analyses were subsequently developed and revised in light of the focus group discussions. If semiotics is characterised by diverse theoretical perspectives, its methods are even less universally agreed upon and semiotic theory has informed textual analysis in varying ways. It does not help that the work of influential and talented analysts such as Barthes (1973) and Williamson (1978) in deconstructing popular media texts is, while certainly theory based, also highly intuitive and without a clearly articulated methodology. Prior to attempting to articulate a methodology for semiotics it is useful to clarify the aims of analysis which inform the method. Emphasising the structural basis of semiotics, Chandler (2001) argues that:

"The task of the semiotician is to look beyond the specific texts or practices to the systems of functional distinctions operating within them. The primary goal is to establish the underlying conventions, identifying significant differences and oppositions in an attempt to model the system of categories, relations (syntagmatic and paradigmatic), connotations, distinctions and rules of combination employed... the investigation of such practices involves trying to make explicit what is usually only implicit" (Chandler, 2001).

The most important part of Chandler's statement is contained in the last phrase - that semiotics is about making explicit what is implicit. As such, any semiotic method must provide the analyst with a way to get beneath the surface of the text and tap into those meanings which are assumed and not stated. The analytical method proposed by Chandler is very much aligned with the goal of bringing the deeper meaning structures of texts to the surface, and I found this method a useful guide for my own analysis in this study. Key analytical steps proposed by Chandler include:

1. Identifying key signifiers and determining what they signify
2. Determining the paradigmatic features of signifiers and of the text as a whole
3. Identifying the syntagmatic structure of the text by considering the relationship (spatial and sequential) between signifiers within the text, and the relationship of the text to other texts external to it
4. Identifying the semiotic codes of communication employed in the text in order to determine what cultural assumptions and values are in play
5. Exploring the construction of reality within the text and how individual interpretations of the text vary

In detailing these steps, I will describe what they look like in a general sense, as well as how they worked in practice in the context of this study, for it is perhaps not surprising that there is considerable difference between the theory of the practice of semiotics as outlined by Chandler, and the practice itself as I experienced it.

1. *Signifiers and Signifieds*

A text, such as an advertisement, is a complex sign comprised of many other signs. A useful way to begin to deconstruct a text is to identify the important signifiers in the text

with an eye to determining the corresponding signifieds (Chandler, 2001). To start with, it is usually easiest to consider the signifiers at a denotative level as the denotative or surface meaning is readily accessible and is a good means by which to identify the key elements of a text. For a television commercial, even on the simplest level, there is a great deal to think about including:

⇒ the overall sales message;
⇒ supporting claims made about the advertised product;
⇒ images and image sequences;
⇒ narrative structure and content;
⇒ background music or sound; and,
⇒ voiceovers and captions.

At first glance, these aspects of the text are readily apparent to most viewers. A more insightful analysis will additionally consider the use of lighting, colour, costume, editing, mise-en-scene etc, as each of these elements also has the potential to contribute significantly to the meaning of the text. At this early stage the analysis is rather broad and sweeping, as it is initially difficult to determine the ideological value of sign elements.

In this study, for the most part analysis began with identification of the key signifiers of each ad. However, as the analysis evolved I often returned to this initial stage to reconsider the importance of elementary signs in terms of the revelations of subsequent analysis, particularly where the connotative meaning of an ad as a whole was easier to grasp than the underlying signifiers. Scrutiny of key signifiers often directed the analysis in ways unrelated to issues of food and health, and while these avenues were explored at the time, they were ultimately excluded from the written presentation of the analysis. This means that a lot of the analytical work involved in this study is not apparent in the written findings. Sometimes, what appeared as an unrelated path of signification was later linked to the health meanings of the ad. For example, in the Yoplait Lite ad, the signification of Frenchness initially seemed relevant only to the branding of the product and not to the health meanings generated in the ad. However, in light of participants' understandings of Frenchness as sexy and romantic, the signification of Frenchness was seen as contributing to the construction of the product as naughty and indulgent. This construction was in turn located in the moral meanings which surround food and lead to its categorisation as 'good' or 'bad' - meanings which are fundamental to the definition of healthy food.

Having identified key signifiers within a text, the next step is to elaborate the connotative chains that make up the sign system, remembering that signifieds are not fixed to signifiers in a one-to-one relationship (Beasley & Danesi, 2002), rather any signifier can generate a string of meanings. This is an important assumption if we are to allow for the subjective interpretation of signifiers. The transition from denotation to connotation is not discrete but progressive and continuous. The denotative meaning is that which we are culturally (and ideologically) positioned to understand most readily. It is the surface meaning which appears as obvious and unmediated (although it is not). Connotative meanings are variable in nature and can be more difficult to uncover.

2. *Paradigmatic Analysis*

Considering the structural relationships between signs is useful for elaborating the connotative meanings of signifiers. Paradigmatic analysis occurs on several levels, both within the text and outside it. Looking at the text as a whole, consideration of the relationship of the text to others within the same paradigm reveals the meaningful distinctions in the text. Chandler (2001) urges consideration of the medium and genre to which the text belongs, asking questions such as "how might a change of medium affect the meanings generated?" and "what might the text have been like if it formed part of a different genre?" In this study, I considered how TV advertising differs from advertising in other media (magazine, newspaper, radio, billboard, Internet etc), and what formal features of advertising distinguish it from other textual forms. These considerations lead to the identification of important sources of signification. For example, if advertising specifically aims to give social significance to objects, then the structural positioning of products in ads is especially important.

Within an ad text, paradigmatic analysis involves identifying the various paradigm sets to which key signifiers belong and asking the question of why each signifier was chosen from amongst the possible alternatives, and how the absence of particular signifiers is meaningful (Chandler, 2001). The aim is to determine the values that are connoted by the chosen signifier. The *commutation test* involves the imagined substitution of signifiers for alternatives within the same paradigm and is a valuable way of determining the distinctive significance of particular signifiers (Chandler, 2001). Frith (1997) uses a form of commutation test to explore how power is depicted in ads. For example, Frith suggests substituting a woman with a man, or a white person with a black person and considering how the message changes. In this study, the commutation test was particularly useful for determining the significance of gender representations, and lead, for example, to consideration of why a female rather than a male scientist is used in the Yakult ad.

3. *Syntagmatic Analysis*

As with paradigmatic analysis, syntagmatic analysis involves both the text as a whole and its constituent signs. Syntagmatic analysis concerns the relationship between signifiers within the ad text, as well as the relationship that the ad text as a whole has with other texts. The analytical aim is to understand how signifiers combine in meaningful ways. The structural relationships between signifiers within advertisements are very important from a marketing perspective, as the successful branding of a product primarily depends on the transference of meaning to the product as achieved through the advertisement (Danesi, 2002). This transference is generally accomplished through the formal structure of the ad as demonstrated in Dyer's (1982) analysis of the Renault car commercial.

Syntagmatic analysis of TV ads is complex as both spatial and sequential relationships between diverse signs must be considered. Within an ad, sequential syntagmatic analysis involves studying how frames, shots, scenes and sequences combine to generate meaning. Within discrete frames the spatial relationship between elements is also significant. On another level, consideration is given to how the ad relates to other texts including:

⇒ ads in the same break;
⇒ the TV program it interrupts (or that precedes or follows it);

⇒ other ads in the same series (for the same product) ;
⇒ ads for different products made by the same manufacturer;
⇒ ads for competitors' products; and
⇒ ads employing similar themes.

It is important to think about an ad's external relationship to other media texts as many of the meanings of any media text are intertextual, relying on readers' knowledge of surrounding texts.

While in theory, the distinction between paradigmatic and syntagmatic analysis is clear, in practice it depends greatly on the level of analysis. In this study, what appeared as a paradigmatic concern when considering an ad as a meaningful unit, became a syntagmatic concern when considering several ads as a meaningful unit. For example, while the signification of Frenchness in the Yoplait Lite ad has a paradigmatic element (i.e. there are specific qualities associated with France that are not associated with other countries), the signification of Frenchness in *all* Yoplait commercials functions syntagmatically, so that Yoplait is seen, in the words of one participant, as "the French company"; ads for Yoplait products are part of a larger unit of meaning which is the Yoplait brand. In presenting ad analyses in the next chapter, I was not too concerned with distinguishing between paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships between signs. For the most part I have excluded these technical terms, and focused instead on describing how signs work apart from, and together with, other signs to contribute to the overall meaning of the text.

4. *Codes*
From a structural perspective we come finally to consider the codes through which the text is understood. This is achieved through identifying the preferred reading of the text in terms of the cultural assumptions that are necessary for its interpretation. The focus group discussions were especially useful for identifying the preferred and alternative readings of ads. Various codes apply to give television commercials meaning including advertising codes, social codes, visual codes, linguistic codes and the codes of television production amongst others. Being critically aware of codes is difficult as our social and cultural experience prepares us to interpret them 'naturally'. As such, we are generally unaware of the operation of codes and while we may readily interpret them, we may not be able to identify the rules by which they operate. For example, most people are unable to articulate the filmic conventions of continuity editing but can none-the-less understand a filmed sequence in accordance with these rules. The Yakult ad provides a good example of how televisual codes (in this case the conventions of news and documentary programs) promote particular readings.

5. *Social Semiotics*
Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the social aspect of the meaning making process deserves consideration. Social semiotics pertains to the ideological function of textual representations and is concerned with determining who the ad speaks on behalf of, who it addresses, and what version of reality it privileges. O'Barr (quoted in Frith, 1997, p. 9) defines ideology as "ideas that buttress and support a particular distribution of power in society". Ideology is always cultural and political in nature in that the beliefs that comprise it are artefacts of a particular culture at a particular time in history. Ideology is hidden inasmuch as it appears universal, embodying the 'taken for granted' and 'common sense'. Because ideological assumptions are hidden they remain

unchallenged. Semiotic analysis is particularly useful for revealing the ideological assumptions embodied in cultural texts such as advertising.

Although ideology as a theoretical concept assumes that meaning is culturally shared, readings of texts nonetheless differ as not everyone has the same beliefs (Frith, 1997). Individual experience and sub-cultural or cross-cultural socialisation also impact upon how a message is read. The openness of any text depends greatly on the degree to which it achieves ideological closure. Generally speaking, interpretation is far from open and ideology works strongly to constrain the possible meanings of a text.

Recognising that textual interpretations vary, the semiotician is encouraged to consider the idiosyncrasies of their own reading of a text. This can be done simply and effectively by inviting other readings of the text and exploring how they differ from one another and from the semiotic analysis. In the present study, this was achieved by exploring participants' readings of ads, with the extra advantage that the issues raised in these readings could be further explored in the social context of the group discussion. Sometimes the readings offered by participants were entirely new in that they had not emerged through semiotic analysis. For example, participants felt that the Lean Cuisine ad constructed women as competing with one another in terms of food and body weight. With this in mind, I then considered how this reading was made possible, and found that the construction of shots in the ad promoted this interpretation.

Here I have presented the application of semiotics as a very linear process. In practice, the process involves travelling back and forth between analytical stages. A television ad is a highly complex, dynamic form of text. Television ads are meaningfully dense - as they are designed to be viewed more than once, and because they are expensive to produce and broadcast, ads must convey as much information as possible in a matter of seconds. While I followed the analytical process outlined above, it is not desirable or perhaps possible, to articulate all the stages and processes of analysis for each ad. In the interests of creating a concise and detailed account of the health related meanings in the ads, the final analysis presented in the next chapter is not patterned on the analytical process just described, and only those aspects most salient to the research focus are discussed.

Reflexive Commentary

Semiotic analysis is concerned with uncovering the ideological assumptions that underlie sign systems, that is, the cultural aspects of communication. In the same spirit, in this section I hope to offer a somewhat introspective account of the assumptions underpinning this study. I will begin by locating myself in the research, describing my cultural and experiential situation, and discussing how I approached the research process. I will then articulate the epistemological assumptions that drove the research and shaped its outcomes. Next I will consider the authored nature of my account of the research, and finally, I will look at how participants approached the research, with a particular focus on how the ads fit within their existing meaning systems. This discussion is structured under the headings of *subjectivity* (concerned with how I approached the research) and *intertextuality* (concerned with how participants approached the research).

Subjectivity

I am a 26 year old, Caucasian, middle class woman. At the time of conducting the focus group discussions I was approximately six to ten years younger than the participants in this study, but apart from this, my cultural background was similar to theirs. Having said this, Sydney, where the focus group sessions took place, is a culturally diverse city and participants included three English women, one Dutch and one New Zealander. Only four of a total of nine participants were Australian. I don't think this was a problem as all participants were socialised in Western, consumer culture, and had been living in Australia for several years.

At the time of writing I am a Masters student with an academic background in media studies and communication as well as psychology. As a field, media / communication studies tends to focus on texts (television, music videos, film, advertising, popular magazines etc), whereas psychology tends to focus on people. However, we have witnessed a 'discursive turn' in psychology with a new focus on language and text, as well as an increased emphasis on people (not just society and culture broadly) in media studies. As such, the boundaries between the two disciplines have blurred. Even studying media/communication and social psychology at university only four or five years ago, I had a strong sense that the two apparently distinct fields were getting at the same thing, although for the most part, neither seemed to realise it. So there is something of a feeling of relief for me in seeing the two fields come together (along with many other fields such as anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, women's studies, linguistics etc), and being part of that exchange by undertaking a study such as this one.

The media studies influence upon me is most obvious in my choice of semiotics as a research approach and the treatment of ads as 'texts'. Surprisingly, for an area of study with a decent history, semiotic theory is not terribly prescriptive about such matters as epistemology and ontology. However, as I think I made clear in the preceding chapter on semiotics, modern formulations of semiotics sit quite comfortably with social constructionist ideas about knowledge and reality. Critical consideration of how power is structured in society is central to both semiotic and constructionist ideas and also centrally important to me in doing this research.

Though seldom addressed, epistemological concerns are just as important as methodological concerns when conducting research. Epistemological assumptions fundamentally drive research practices and shape research agenda (Chamberlain, 2004). This study is informed by a social constructionist epistemology. Social constructionism is concerned with how the world is structured through particular accounts, and does not treat 'knowledge' as a straightforward, accurate description of 'reality' (Gergen, 1985). Moreover, because knowledge is seen as social in origin, it is always culturally and historically located (Gergen, 1985).

Although this study is not underpinned by positivist epistemological assumptions, an academic style of writing, which typically implies objectivity, is used. As an aside, it is worth noting that wherever I have used the terms 'significance' or 'significant', I am not referring to statistical significance but to the signifying practices that are involved in making sense of signs (i.e. signified + signifier links). While, for conventional reasons, I have tended to write using the passive voice and excluding the pronouns 'I' and 'we', I

did not approach the research from a position of objectivity. The semiotic analysis of advertisements is necessarily subjective, however my interpretations are grounded in:

⇒ a strong academic and cultural familiarity with advertising texts (and the culture of consumerism in which they feature);
⇒ the analyses and interpretations offered by participants;
⇒ semiotic theory; and,
⇒ a critical understanding and awareness of the codes of television.

Nor do I maintain a position of objectivity in conducting the focus group sessions. Participants actively involved me in discussion, seeking my clarification, direction and approval. The fact that I personally knew some of the participants certainly precluded an objective view on my part, and I freely admit that I played a role in determining the nature and content of talk generated in these sessions. Moreover, participants knew that they were participating in a study and this knowledge alone would have influenced their behaviour.

My primary point of entry into the research project was through the advertisements as data. My focus was not upon the research participants themselves, (i.e. I had no emancipatory intent and was not concerned with making participants heard as an oppressed people). The aim of the focus group discussions was to verify the semiotic analyses and to lend a social dimension to the analysis generally. By contextualising and elaborating analytical themes, the talk of participants was fundamental to moving the analysis forward and into the realm of ideology inquiry. Formal ethics approval was sought before the focus groups discussions took place, however given the relatively innocuous content of the discussions, no real risks to participants were identified.

Most of the analytic work occurred in the rather drawn out process of writing up the research. It was only in the process of writing and rewriting that the findings of semiotic analysis of individual ads slowly came together. The talk of participants greatly assisted in this process of layering to give thematic cohesion and meaning to otherwise apparently distinct texts. This process is very much reflected in how the analysis and discussion chapter is structured. The ads are first introduced individually with a focus on their construction in semiotic terms. Once similar meanings start to emerge consistently across ads, these are taken up and discussed more broadly. In this 'higher' level discussion, the talk of participants features more. While in theory, the distinction between ad specific and higher level meanings is straightforward, in practice this is more of a continuum than a clear-cut distinction.

Intertextuality

Participants in each of the two groups seemed to approach the research in different ways, or perhaps more accurately, they approached the *ads* differently. While the singles group produced a detailed commentary for each ad, the discussion produced by the mothers group was less focused. Participants in the singles group more readily looked beyond the denotative or surface meaning of the ads to consider how the ads were constructed, what assumptions underpinned the ads, and how symbolism was used within the ads. By contrast, participants in the mothers group discussed the ads in broader terms and viewing ads tended to launch more general discussion about eating and purchasing habits, not always directly relevant to the advertised product. The mothers' conversation was narrative based and ad viewings prompted the retelling

of individual accounts of personal experience, relating to such topics as grocery shopping and mealtimes. There was much less critical discussion about individual ads than with the singles group, and certainly very little direct consideration of the semiotic work of ads.

This is not to say that one group was 'better' than the other, only that the nature of the data generated was fundamentally different for the two groups of participants. Moreover, while participants in each group tended to talk about the ads differently, these tendencies were not exclusive. So at times, participants in the singles group spoke generally of health related issues, while participants in the mothers group offered a critical analysis of a specific ad. Participants in both groups did not think of the ads in an isolated way but immediately contextualised the advertised product within their own experience, identifying it as something that they did or did not use, and would or would not buy, and justifying why. In reviewing the ads, participants were motivated to legitimate the advertising message of those products which they purchased. Often participants were unable to do so in terms of the health claims made in the advertisement, in which case, they would refer to their individual circumstances or other product qualities that made the product appealing to them. For example, in discussing the Yakult advertisement, Sharon argued that the product appealed to her because of a medical problem particular to her, for which she perceived the product to be helpful:

"My problem is I've got an irritable bowel, a twisted gut, so anything that says that it's got some kind of goodness that's almost going to sort of flush me away, the acidophilus type whatever, lacto whatever, I don't know what it all is, it appeals to me"

Overall the style and structure of discussion differed between the two groups, and this is reflected in how the respective analyses are presented.

Participants in both groups generally denied paying attention to advertising, saying such things as "I never listen, I never take notice of them" and "I actually don't get taken in by ads at all, I just, never buy something off an ad". On this basis, participants in the singles group reflected critically upon the research process, raising issues related to validity:

Jane: You don't analyse ads like this, this isn't natural
Sharon: No but you do subconsciously
Jane: But subconsciously...
Gina: You don't
Jane: ...is very different from doing this, so going out and...
Gina: Can you remember all these ads, like honestly?
Jane: No but I've never discussed them like this, I've never gone 'oh'...
Sharon: What, do I remember seeing them before?
Jane: ...But at the end of the day
Gina: Yeah, no, well I remember seeing them too
Sharon: Yeah
Gina: But I see it, then I walk away, I don't...
Jane: Yeah, that's it, so they have to get into your psyche without discussing something and going this looks nice about this product, they have to literally do it in a minute sell to you, so they've got to get something across so it's got 'yum, yum'

While participants claimed not to pay attention to advertising, the focus group discussions dramatically illustrated that beyond advertising, television is an important source of information about health. Participants in the mothers group frequently referred to television news and documentary programs in assessing the health benefits of advertised food products. For example, in the extract below, Angela referred to an exposé style television article which challenged her understanding of Nutri-Grain as healthy:

Angela: I think everyone's been fooled by Nutri-Grain for a long time, I think it's only just recently that it's...
Alicia: You think of iron man
Sue: Because of the Currys[1] advertising it you do associate it with sport
Alicia: Like if you wanna be a healthy surfy running up and down the beach, it's Nutri-Grain
Kate: That's the funny thing like 'if you eat Nutri-Grain...
Angela: That's right
Kate: ...you'll have a body like this', it's like yeah sure (Alicia laughs)
Angela: And I think I only saw it, Sunrise[2] did it, and I think it was um, Melissa was saying 'oh, but I feed my two year old it all the time, I didn't realise it was loaded with sugar, because why do the iron men, are always the one who are promoting it?'

Further discussion served to cement this new understanding of Nutri-Grain as a high sugar (and therefore 'bad') food product. Again, another televisual text was referenced in support of this understanding:

Kate: Nutri-Grain normally has the lady coming out of the pantry too (lots of nods and murmurs of agreement)
Kelly: The nutritionist
Angela: The dietician, and she's a very well respected child nutritionist
Kelly: But I've actually seen her in something else saying how bad Nutri-Grain is
Angela: And she sold out
Kelly: Mmm, so she got paid and she went 'okay'
Angela: Mmm, because she's a really highly respected...
Kelly: Yeah she is

This extract also reveals how in making sense of ads participants frequently referred intertextually to other ads for the same product; Kate referred to a previous ad for Nutri-Grain when she spoke of "the lady coming out of the pantry". Similarly, when discussing the Nutella ad, which features claims based on the glycemic index of the product, Angela and Kelly referred to a previous ad campaign for Nutella, which compared the sugar and fat content of Nutella to other spreads:

Kelly: Do hazelnuts have oil in them, or just peanuts?
Sue: Yeah, I'd say they do
Angela: It's actually, it's actually much less fat content than peanut butter, because that used to be one of their claims

[1] Sue is referring to Lisa Curry, who won several Commonwealth Games medals in swimming events, and her husband Grant Kenny, who is an Olympic medallist and former iron man champion.

[2] Sunrise is a breakfast show which is broadcast weekday mornings on Australia's channel Seven.

Kelly: It did that's what they first came out with how it was so much less fat than peanut butter, 'cos it's not oily like peanut butter can be, at all

And again, when discussing the Weetbix ad, participants referred to another ad for the same product:

Angela: And I also like the one, not necessarily that one, but the one where they have all the rugby guys, and they're all going through the list of how many they eat, that appeals to me 'cos it's just quite funny...
Kelly: And they've mixed them up too...
Angela: ...how many some of them eat, yeah
Kelly: They've mixed the rugby and the cricketers together in some of them
Angela: Like Gina Gregan who eats seven or something, like you just, now I think every time I see him, how do you eat seven Weetbix, like it's (Sue and Kelly laugh), it's just something that's in my mind, so that's obviously a good one isn't it, that it's still in my mind (Sue laughs)
Kelly: Or the one where they went down, made them play like a, they all said a few words
Angela: 'Ten out of'...
Kelly: Yeah

The tendency to refer to other ads for the same product was not specific to the mothers group, and participants in the singles group also referred to other ads for the same product when discussing Yakult and Special K. The analysis of the Special K ad in particular, presented in the next chapter, explored how existing understandings of the product based on previous ad campaigns, informed participants' interpretation of the newer ad.

The intertextuality of meaning that is apparent in these examples illustrates that as Gillian Dyer (1982) argues, advertisements do not exist apart from real life. Although the representations in ads may be idealised, stereotyped or otherwise less than realistic, this does not mean that ads refer only to some kind of alternate world. Particularly when the characters in ads are real people, such as a recognised sporting identity or a respected dietician, their existence outside the frame of the ad creates a bi-directional flow of meaning, as with the dietician/nutritionist from the Nutri-Grain ad, whose promotion of Nutri-Grain was intended to add credibility to the product, but ultimately diminished her own professional credibility. Ads are but one text among many that are encountered daily, and which bounce off one another to reproduce and generate meaning.

The exchange between Angela and Kelly about Weetbix ads also demonstrates how ads are consumed and enjoyed by viewers. As Twitchell (1996) argues in his book about modern, ad-centric culture, advertising plays a role in defining common culture such that our shared knowledge of ads links us together. Angela and Kelly seemed to take pleasure in their shared knowledge of Weetbix ads and in the sense of commonality that this shared knowledge brought. In general, participants in the mothers group were very forthright in stating their enjoyment of particular ads:

Angela: I love the Nutri-Grain ad
Keryn: What is it about the ad?
Angela: I think because I've got a boy, and he's a big boy and I just think that'll be me

Keryn: Right
Angela: When he's that age, I just can see that's, and it just makes me laugh the way he grunts at her and...
Keryn: Yeah, so just the humourous aspect of it, any other ads that...
Alicia: I like the muesli bar ad
Keryn: The LCMs
Alicia: That's just the way kids are, you really want them to do everything but they don't care (general laughter)

Such dialogue presents a challenge to the often used argument that ads are ignored by viewers or regarded wholly as an invasive and unwelcome interruption. In the extract above, Alicia and Angela talked about enjoying particular ads because they were able to relate to the situations and relationships represented within the ads. For them, ads are not other-worldly abstractions, but culturally embedded texts with everyday relevance.

Having explored the unique perspectives brought to the research, both by myself as the researcher, and by the research participants, it is now appropriate to move on to examine the ads more closely, and the interpretations of them that were generated through semiotic analysis and in the focus group discussions. Although, most recently, I have emphasised subjective influences upon meaning-making, it should be remembered that communication is always culturally and historically bound. The meanings encoded in a text in its production greatly restrict how it can be read. Moreover, in making sense of texts, individuals draw upon socially shared discourses. The aim of the analysis, presented in the next chapter, is to identify these discourses and determine how they function ideologically.

Analysis and Discussion

Part One: Singles

The main aim of this study is to determine what constructions of health are privileged in food advertising. In other words, what do these ads say about health and what does this tell us about the meaning of health in relation to food in consumer society? At first glance, the ads viewed by the singles group differ greatly in the health related meanings they offer and in the extent to which they reference health at all. However, semiotic analysis reveals that these differences are mostly on a denotative level. At 'deeper' connotative and ideological levels, there is considerable overlap between ads in the meanings referenced and constructed. These consistencies centre on issues of responsibility for health (informed by the political agenda of healthism), with widespread moral judgements about being and doing good. Across ads beauty and health meanings converge and the ideological implications of this convergence are discussed.

This discussion is presented in three parts. In the first part, the construction of health references in the ads is examined. The second part is concerned with how the notions of *health* and *beauty* converge in the ads. The political consequences of this convergence are discussed in terms of the beauty myth (Wolf, 1990). The third and final part focuses on the moral implications of the intersecting health and food discourses in the ads. The first part is characterised mostly by denotative and connotative analysis, while the second and third parts are concerned more with the ideological implications of particular representations.

Overview

This section aims to introduce and provide an overview of each of the ads shown to participants in the singles group, with a specific focus on how health is constructed in the ads. While we enter the analysis at a denotative level, this necessarily leads to consideration of connotative meanings. Although ideological issues are alluded to, these are not fully explored in this section, but in the following sections. The ads are discussed in the order in which they were viewed by participants – all ads are included in the appending CD.

Healthy Choice

Healthy Choice is a range of low fat, pre-prepared, convenience meals. The 30 second ad tells the story of a single woman as she goes throughout her busy day, emphasising all the aspects of her life she has neglected. The voiceover (a woman's voice) ties the scenes together: "You probably should take better care of your skin (Figure 1), and your feet (Figure 2), and your car (Figure 3), and your plants (Figure 4), and you definitely should take better care of your parents, but at least you can take care of yourself without feeling guilty, because your favourite Asian noodle soups are now 97 percent fat free. McCain Healthy Choice…is looking after yourself."

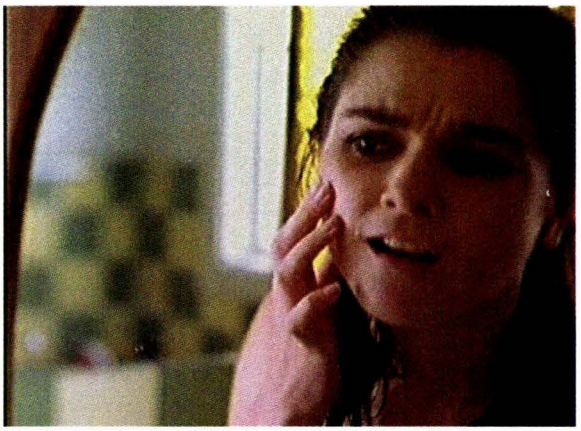

Figure 1

Figure 2

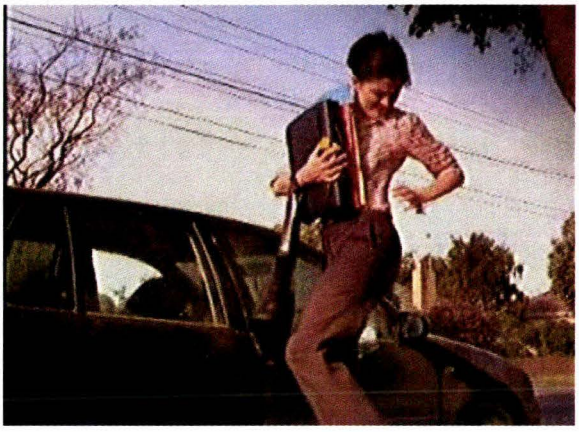

Figure 3

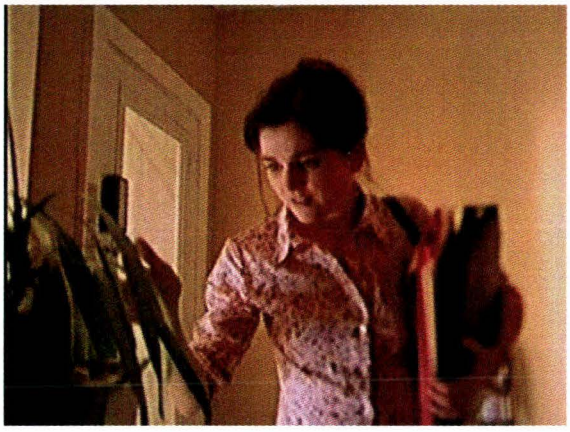

Figure 4

The parents are incorporated through messages they have left on the answering machine to which the woman listens as she prepares her Healthy Choice dinner. The frenetic activity of the woman is reflected in the movement of the camera which is unsteady when focused on her, a technique reminiscent of documentary or 'real life' footage, but also used in fast paced action sequences in hospital and police dramas. Overall, the ad constructs Healthy Choice as nutritious and convenient – the perfect dinner time option for an independent, working woman.

The explicit health related content of the Healthy Choice ad is summarised well in the closing shot of the ad in which the boxed product is displayed (Figure 5).

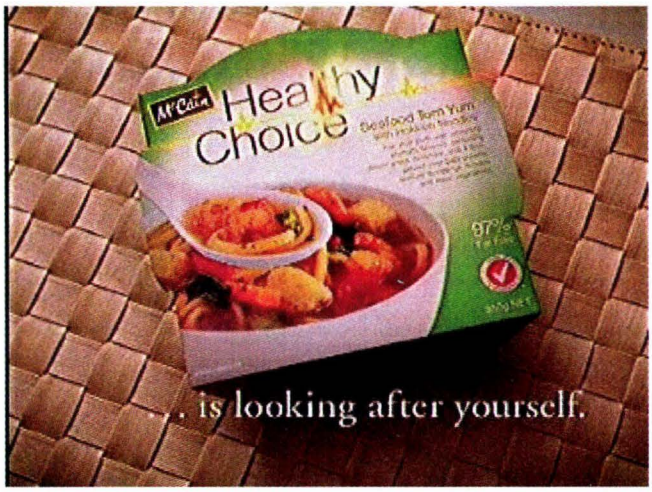

Figure 5

The package design includes an electrocardiogram which is made to magically pulse. This clever visual device coupled with the product name *Healthy* Choice, the text '97% fat free', and the Heart Foundation 'tick' endorsement works to construct the product as healthy. This is achieved through reference to both general notions of what constitutes health, as in the name of the product and the by-line "...is looking after yourself", and more specific aspects including maintaining heart health (implied by the Heart Foundation 'tick' and electrocardiogram), and minimising fat intake.

Participants agreed that the Healthy Choice advertisement makes a very narrow appeal to health, which is secondary to the convenience of the product.

Keryn: The name of it, Healthy Choice, but the only thing that it's promoted on the basis of is being low fat...
Jane: Most things are, most products are, aren't they
Keryn: ...it's not saying anything else about health
Sharon: No I think it's actually, that is what it's trying to say, as you say healthy, but I think really what most of us read is, this is easy
Gina: Me too
Jane: Easy and...
Sharon: Easy, and I might get (inaudible) and I might not get too fat, but I think that if anyone's got any brains about them...
Keryn: So the main selling point in that ad is the ease and then healthy...
Jane: I think so
Sharon: All these things it's Lean Cuisine, it's Healthy Choice
Jane: Well it's called Healthy Choice
Sharon: It's easy
Jane: I think a lot of people assume that low fat is healthy though don't they, or any fat's bad, which I'd never believe, 'cos it's not

Curiously, in response to this appraisal of the Healthy Choice ad, Sharon reassessed her own rationale for purchasing products such as Healthy Choice:

Sharon: But it must show how gullible that I am, in particular, but I know, but then I know that it's not the healthy thing that it's the easy to use, I know what I'm doing
Beth: You like a bit of reassurance that there is food that's not bad for you

Sharon: Yeah, not like one hundred percent fat like McDonalds

Sharon's comment highlights the allure of health appeals in food advertising. While Sharon recognised the superficiality of the health appeals made in the Healthy Choice ad, she nonetheless stated a desire to believe in them. Appeals to health may be used to appease the consumer's conscience by providing a more socially acceptable or morally elevated rationale for consumption. Whereas an obsession with body weight is viewed as harmful, the pursuit of health, often through weight management, is sanctioned as individually beneficial and socially responsible. In short, women must still strive for control over their bodies, as evidenced by a slim figure, but with an ostensible goal of health. It is not just the Healthy Choice ad that raises such issues, and the concerns that are raised here are discussed in more detail in the next section, Health and Beauty.

Lean Cuisine

Lean Cuisine is a very similar product to Healthy Choice. However Lean Cuisine is marketed as more expensive and higher quality than Healthy Choice. The Lean Cuisine commercial is short (15 seconds) and simple. The setting is a brightly lit ultra-modern office characterised by soft pastel tones. Several women sit working at their desks. One woman complains "for lunch today I had two deadlines and three biscuits", to which a second woman boasts "I had Italian style vegetables, in a rich sun-dried tomato sauce, between layers of spinach pasta". As she speaks, the meal she is describing is displayed in a tight shot (Figure 6). Her colleagues are clearly put aback and somewhat perplexed. All is resolved when the light-hearted revelation is made "it was Lean Cuisine". The ad closes with a direct sales pitch featuring the packaged product (Figure 7) with a male voiceover "Lean Cuisine in a bowl, it's not just lean, it's cuisine".

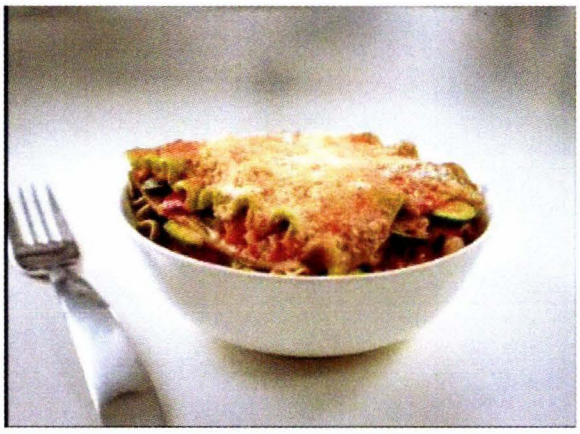

Figure 6

Figure 7

The simplicity of the mise en scene in the Lean Cuisine commercial contrasts with the busy and changing backdrops of the Healthy Choice ad. The stylistic simplicity of the Lean Cuisine ad contributes to the product's status as high quality, particularly in relation to the disorderly and fast-paced Healthy Choice ad. While both ads focus on the convenience of the product for busy working women, the differing visual style of the ads creates a different social identity for the consumer of each product (Messaris, 1997). The reductive style of the Lean Cuisine ad "implicitly rejects the flashiness and

the glitter of the social climber" (Messaris, 1997) to create a consumer identity with which participants more willingly identified. This was evidenced by participants' responses to the ad:

Gina: It's a nice clean office and the food appears nice and clean and healthy and...
Jane: The overall look of the advert I quite liked because it is giving it, it actually looks quite attractive, the food, and it's not as fussy as....
Sharon: Nice background and suddenly this lovely Lean Cuisine looks very, very tasty
Jane: The colour of the ad is very clever
Keryn: (to Gina) You were speaking in particular about the connotations of the colour, the cleanliness and naturalness and...
Gina: Yes
Sharon: An office everyone would love to be in

The neutral colour scheme used in the ad is an important aspect of the simple, high class style of the ad. The entire office setting, including computer monitors, desks, chairs and files, is white with very pale pastel tones. This colour scheme is not accidental or arbitrary, but is deliberately used because of its significance. White is a connotatively rich colour in Western society with diverse although related meanings including purity, cleanliness, sterility and modernity. While some of these meanings are transferred to the product, the white and pastel tones also point up the contrast between the natural colours of food and the artificial whiteness of a synthetic environment. Against the backdrop of the office the rich red and green colours of the lasagne meal appear particularly enticing.

The value of the product as low fat or 'lean' is taken for granted, and the ad instead focuses on constructing the product as delicious and high quality. As with the Healthy Choice ad, the main message in the Lean Cuisine commercial is that independent, working women are too busy to worry about what they eat. However women are not absolved of this responsibility (and the guilt associated with failure), instead a marketing space is created for quick to prepare and low fat, 'healthy' food. More so than Healthy Choice, Lean Cuisine's only health related appeal is that it is low in fat; the product is called Lean Cuisine, the voiceover says "it's not just lean, it's cuisine", and '97% fat free' is clearly written on the box pictured at the end of the advertisement.

So Good

So Good is a fortified soy milk product. The So Good ad makes extensive use of meaningfully complex visual imagery. The ad appeals strongly to the emotional aspects of health - it is about feeling (and looking) good. The 15 second ad does not have a linear narrative based structure, and is instead composed of a montage of scenes. There is no central character and each scene depicts different women engaged in some fun and energetic activity such as learning to surf (Figure 8), yoga (Figure 9), and jumping on a 'fly wall' (Figure 10).

Figure 8

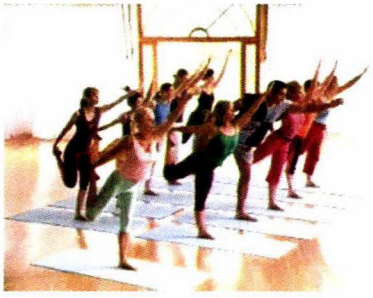

Figure 9

Figure 10

So Good is the thread of meaning which relates all these activities to one another. This is clearly illustrated through editing, music, voiceover, lighting, colour, the parallel construction and theme of each scene and the obvious containment of each scene within the frame of the single advertisement. Editing, in particular, is used cleverly, and representations of flowing milk blend each scene into the next to identify the product as the thematic link between scenes. For example, from the opening shot of the ad (Figure 8), the focus shifts to the laughing and gleeful face of one of the women (Figure 11). A milky wave envelopes her (Figure 12) and the shot diffuses into the next scene of a yoga class in progress.

Figure 11

Figure 12

A similar technique is used in transitioning from the yoga scene. At the front of the class, looking very unsteady and out of place in a rugby jersey and shorts amongst a room full of women, is a young man (Figure 13)[3]. His toppling form is overlaid by a giant carton of So Good soy milk (Figure 14).

[3] In Gender Advertisements, Erving Goffman (1979) considers how men are represented in the domains of authority and competence of woman. Goffman suggests that by presenting the man as unrealistically ludicrous, the competency of real males is preserved while the female target audience can take pleasure from the representation of male incompetence. In the So Good ad, the male character works to reinforce that this is women's space, and an environment in which he has no legitimate place.

Figure 13

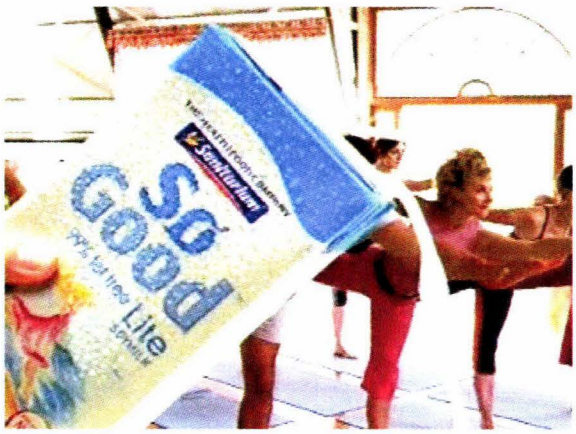

Figure 14

To complete the transition, the flowing stream of milk fills the screen as the carton fades out (Figure 15) and a bowl of cereal fades into focus (Figure 16 and Figure 17)[4].

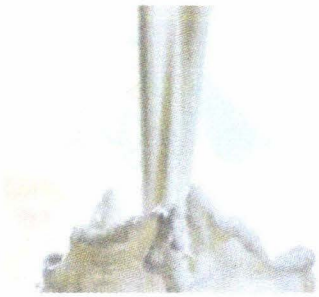

Figure 15

Figure 16

Figure 17

During the ad a light and up-beat tune plays "things can only get better... now I found you", or as Sharon so aptly put it, "things can only get better if you drink it". The voiceover states "so good for your heart, so good for your bones, So Good from Sanitarium, it'll leave you feeling... so good!" The juxtaposition of So Good with energetic and fun activities occasions a transfer of meaning from one to the other, such that the health promoting (and fun) aspects of physical activity become associated with the advertised product. In semiotic terms, the signified (health, energy and enjoyment) attached to the signifier (women laughing while engaged in novel physical activities with friends) is transferred to the product, so that the product is able to signify in place of the original signifier (women laughing...). In short, So Good comes to mean health, energy and enjoyment of life. Although this transaction of meaning appears reasonable – So Good is the healthy fuel that makes all these activities possible – the relationship between So Good and health/energy/enjoyment is actually quite arbitrary. As Williamson (1978) argues, "the advertisement presents this transference of meaning to us as a *fait accompli*, as though it were simply presenting two objects with the same meaning, but in fact it is only *in* the advertisement that this transference takes place" (p.25).

[4] The soft fade in and out transition from one scene to the next, and the relatively slow pace of cutting is typical of advertising that is aimed at women (Welch, Huston-Stein, Wright, and Plehal (1979), described in Messaris (1997)). The editing style of the commercial produces subtle gender connotations; gentle and flowing transitions are associated with femininity. By contrast, more quick and abrupt editing signifies masculinity (Messaris, 1997).

Throughout the So Good ad, many signifiers of health are employed to similar effect. For example, in Figure 17 milk is shown cascading into a particularly healthy looking bowl of cereal and strawberries. In the next shot, a woman sits eating the cereal (Figure 18) while to one side of the bowl sits a plate of fruit, and to the other side, a carton of So Good. Again the message is that So Good is akin to natural fresh fruit and cereal – the perfect compliment to a healthy breakfast. Finally, in the closing shot of the ad (Figure 19), the product is displayed prominently with a bowl of fruit in the background, underscored by the Sanitarium logo "the health food company". Participants were mindful of such advertising devices with Sharon commenting "they're not going to put a big fat chocolate in it, are they".

Figure 18

Figure 19

Given the extent of legislative restrictions upon the use of health claims in food advertising[5], the appeals to health made in the So Good ad are quite strong. While the voiceover contains the only explicit appeal to the supposed health-giving properties of the product, the imagery used throughout the advertisement carries strong health related connotations. This is important, because as Messaris argues:

"the meaning of visual syntax becomes fluid, indeterminate, and more subject to the viewer's interpretational predispositions than is the case with a communication mode such as verbal language, which possesses an elaborate set of explicit indicators of analogy, causality, and other kinds of connections between two or more concepts... this relative indeterminacy of visual syntax plays a central part in processes of visual persuasion... in the context of advertising, this seeming "deficiency" of visual syntax is arguably one of its principal strengths" (1997, p. 40).

For Messaris, the implicitness of visual syntax has at least two major consequences for the persuasive use of visual images. Firstly, the viewer is highly involved in making sense of visual arguments, such that each viewer's interpretation is specific to them. Not only does this enable arguments to be flexible, but the viewer's involvement in the meaning-making process leads them to formulate a proposition which they may then

[5] The Food Standards Australia New Zealand website states that "at present, nutrient content claims are allowed (e.g. *'this food is high in fibre'*), as are some health maintenance claims (e.g. *'calcium is important for healthy bones and teeth'*). However, there is a prohibition on all other types of claims". Specifically, food advertisements are prohibited from claiming a therapeutic or prophylactic action; referring to any disease or physiological condition; using the word 'health' or its derivatives in conjunction with the product name; and giving medical advice.

find more acceptable (Messaris, 1997). Secondly, visual images can be used to imply an argument that may be censored if expressed in a verbal statement. This kind of censorship is not only legal, but more often social, and as Messaris (1997) notes "what is left unspoken by resorting to images is often some assumption of expectation that the ad's audience itself may not want to confront directly" (p. xix).

Consistent with Messaris' (1997) argument that the meaning of visual syntax is not fixed, participants' responses to the So Good ad were mixed. Gina regarded the ad favourably saying "everything about this ad is clean and fresh, like the beach, healthy lifestyle again, the white background". By contrast, Sharon – who had never tried the product and prior to the focus group discussion did not know what it was – voiced a strongly negative appraisal of the ad saying "I think it looks like it tastes like shit" and "something that's milk and says So Good and lite, it makes me think it's awful, tastes like shit, straight away". When pressed, Sharon was unable to explain her construal of the product as "shit" and "watery":

Sharon: I presume it's a watery, sorry I still presume, I don't care about all the healthy bits...
Keryn: You just think it's going to be watery...
Sharon: I just think it's going to be watery, shit milk
Gina: Why, 'cos it's got lite?
Jane: Exactly
Sharon: No, but I like lite milk
Gina: But then how do you know it's going to taste watery?
Sharon: That's what, I don't know, but that's what that says to me, I don't know why, I can't really answer why I think that

Sharon's response to the So Good ad harks to comments made by Jane about Yakult: "it must be good for you because it's so shit". Jane clearly linked the taste of food with its health promoting value or goodness. Similarly, Sharon's understanding of So Good as "horrid" may be in part due to the strong health related connotations evoked in the advertisement. The unusual taste of Yakult contributed to Jane's understanding of the product as healthy, while the health related connotations attached to So Good contributed to Sharon's construal of it as unpalatable.

So Good makes strong emotional appeals to health by evoking images of healthful enjoyment and vitality. The product is also represented in the context in which it is consumed – as an accompaniment to a healthy breakfast of cereal and fruit. So Good is clearly constructed as a healthy, energy-giving fuel that promotes enjoyment of life.

Special K

Special K is a reduced fat, wheat based breakfast cereal. In contrast with the So Good advertisement, the 30 second long Special K ad is constructed very simply - consistent with the "Keep it simple" sales message. There is no mise-en-scene to speak of, only a stark white spotlit background. The background music *I Believe in Miracles* contributes to the light tone of the ad and is congruent with the humourous aspect of the ad. Cook (1992) notes that while music can evoke rich connotations, it is without semantics, making it difficult to specify the meaning of a musical piece. Moreover, musical connotations do not lend themselves to expression in language. Cook suggests that it is this indeterminacy of meaning that makes music a favourable mode of communication for advertisers. While Cook argues that specific song lyrics are

generally not as important as the mood created by music, in the Special K ad the song lyrics do contribute to the meaning of the ad, although not in a conclusive way. The key words in the lyrics are undoubtedly *miracle* and *sexy*. Unprompted, Sharon offered a very straightforward interpretation of the song lyrics: "it means if you eat Special K you'll have a miracle bottom".

The ad is constructed in two halves. In the first half, one by one, diet and exercise books with titles such as 'The 8 Day Diet', 'The 88 Day Exercise Plan' and 'Food is Your Friend (see Figure 20) are tossed into a heap. In a running joke, as each book is thrown onto the pile a frog interjects with "read it" (Figure 21). The stack of discarded books effectively satirises diet culture while also building a knowing empathy with the target consumer.

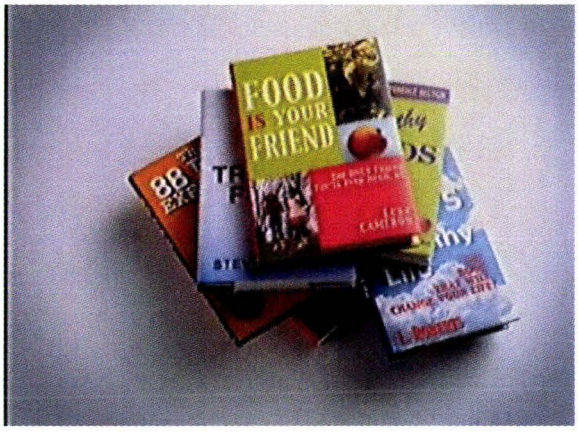

Figure 20

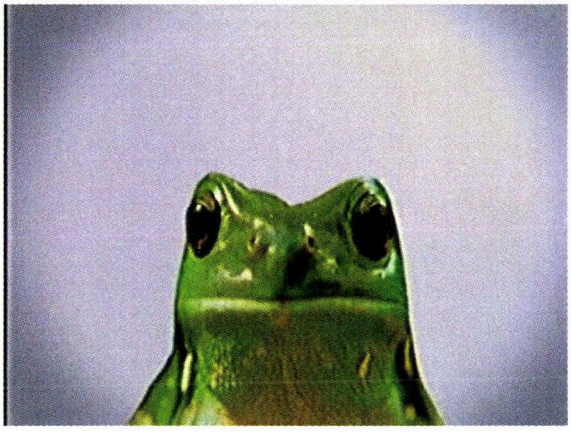

Figure 21

The product is introduced in the second half of the ad in opposition to the ethos represented by the stack of discarded books. The female voiceover states "there's a much simpler way to keep in shape, just eat well, and exercise regularly... keep it simple, with Special K". Her words are reinforced visually by on screen text, and the 'K' from "Keep it simple" forms the 'K' on the front of the boxed product in the closing shot of the ad (see Figure 22 and Figure 23), which is also the 'K' from the Kellogg's logo. The pictorial representation of 'K' works to connect the "Keep it simple" message to the product.

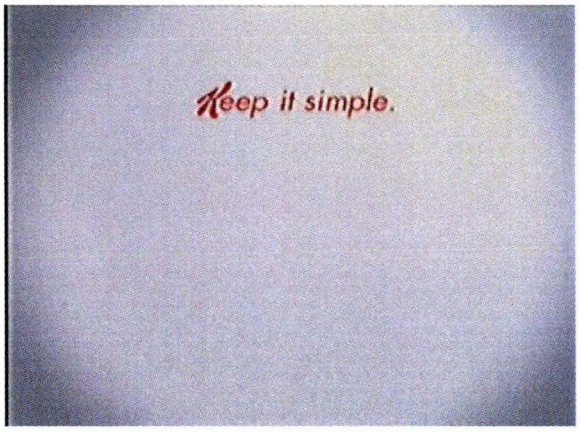

Figure 22

Figure 23

While the Special K ad is primarily about health, the ad does very little to construct the product as healthy. This is partly owing to the "simple" sales message but is also due to the perceived nature of the product outside of the advertising context, as suggested in the extract below. This extract illustrates the cultural understanding of cereal as healthy that pre-exists the ad, and how the construction of the product as "simple" in the ad is consistent with the understanding that "basic food" is healthy.

Sharon: None of us has discussed whether we actually, you know with the other ads, whether we actually thought they were healthy or not
Keryn: Yeah
Sharon: In the, you know the Lean Cuisine and the Healthy Choice or whatever, we discussed whether we actually thought they were good for us, and the funny thing is, none of us actually, and yourself included (gestures toward Keryn), not discussed whether we think it's healthy which means we must believe it is healthy
Keryn: We've just assumed it
Beth: Yeah, I guess it's quite a basic product, it's like
Sharon: But how do we know? Because some, how do we know? How do we really know, like we're slagging off the Healthy Choice, the Lean Cuisine, well maybe not Lean Cuisine but Healthy Choice, saying ...
Keryn: Somehow this has slipped by our radar
Sharon: Yeah it has because all we've, we've talked about the ad in a very very different way, about probably who it's targeted, but is it healthy, no one ever thought...
Beth: It is basic food, it's not like it's, it's not, well I suppose it's fairly basic, but like
Sharon: We hope it's got fibre in it
Beth: It hasn't got lots of components, all sorts of stuff
Keryn: Not so fussy
Beth: You've got a recipe type thing, it's all put together, it's very basic, bran, wheat
Sharon: Well we still assumed it, 'cos you know there was once upon a time there was a cereal that was, cardboard was better for you, do you remember, years ago, it was cornflakes or something, and I don't remember, but it was more healthy and nutritional to eat cardboard than it was to eat fucking cereal, we're like, what? So we all assume that because of brainwashing throughout the years that cereal is very, very healthy
Keryn: If you decided to buy Special K you'd probably go, oh yeah, it's fine, and grab it off the shelf, and you're not going to stand there and read the nutritional information
Sharon: No, exactly, we assume that they're all healthy, because we've been brainwashed...
Gina: But it's cereal
Sharon: ...since we were three

In this extract Sharon argues that we are socialised to regard breakfast cereal as healthy - whether or not it actually is, while Beth argues that the basic composition of cereal ("it hasn't got lots of components, lots of stuff... it's very basic, bran, wheat") makes it seem healthy. Reinforcing Sharon's point, the connotative value of cereal as healthy is evidenced in the So Good ad in which the product, soy milk, is made to seem healthy through juxtaposition with cereal.

While the Special K ad is denotatively and even connotatively simple, it operates with surprising ideological complexity, and it is on an ideological level that the main work of the ad occurs. The ideological context of the Special K ad is considered in more detail in the next section, Health and Beauty.

Yakult

Yakult is a probiotic mild drink. The Yakult ad draws heavily on the discourses of nutritional science employing more complex and explicit appeals to health than in other ads where vague notions of goodness are referenced. As Beth commented "it's trying to say this is seriously, you know, this isn't about body image, this is about scientific, health". With its clear focus on health, the Yakult ad is more like the ads viewed by participants in the mothers group. These differences may be expected as the Yakult ad does not specifically target single women and accordingly, this ad was shown to both groups of participants.

The Yakult ad is 30 seconds long. Various techniques are used to promote an interpretation of the Yakult advertisement as factual and objective, leading Sharon to comment "an educational advert with normal people, why shouldn't you believe it?" The ad is framed by the 'inform tv' banner (Figure 24), which comprises the opening and closing shot. The impression created is that the viewer is not being addressed by the manufacturer of Yakult in their profit-seeking interests. Rather a neutral third-party, 'inform tv', brings us this message for our own benefit, in the social minded and patriotic interests of 'making Australians aware'.

Figure 24

Figure 25

The ad proper continues in an educational tone and the opening scene of the ad (see Figure 25) is constructed more like a news report than a commercial message:

- The 'presenter' addresses the camera directly in a medium shot. This style of address denotes a non-fiction or real-life account and is characteristic of news, documentary and so called 'reality' television. By contrast, in fictional texts the camera is rarely acknowledged in order to engage the audience in the story and facilitate the suspension of disbelief.
- The presenter is identified to the viewer and thereby given credibility. Regardless of the fact that we do not know who Davini Malcolm is, she is apparently a real person and not (only) an actor.
- The presenter stands outside a biological sciences unit which is likely part of a research institution such as a university. This sets the scene in a fashion typical of television news articles while also working to legitimate claims about the product through reference to scientific and academic knowledge.
- The presenter's first words are "we're here to inform you about the benefits of Yakult". Not only are the interests of the consumer elevated above those of the

manufacturer, but the two sets of interests are collapsed together as an attempt is made to veil the advertiser's real motivation (to promote sales of Yakult).

- Typical advertising devices such as catchy jingles and theme music are notably absent.

Through reference to other texts (both advertising and non-advertising forms), participants showed awareness of the formal and stylistic devices used in the Yakult ad. For example, Sharon from the singles group commented on the formal similarity of the ad to a widely broadcast Australian public service announcement which encourages viewers to take regular breaks when driving long distances. Beth, likened the ad to an educational presentation, saying "it looks like one of those science videos... you got shown as a kid at school". These participants also acknowledged that the educational style of the advertisement contributed to their view of the product as credible. Interestingly, this belief in the efficacy of the product persisted despite (and perhaps because of) appraising the ad negatively, as expressed by Jane: "I believe that product, the ads shit but I do believe in it".

Participants in the mothers group also commented on the style of the Yakult ad, likening it to an infomercial. In particular, Alicia noted the similarity of the ad to a pre-formatted advertising slot, Brand Power, which is widely used to advertise branded household and grocery products.

Alicia: It's like those Brand Power ads, I hate them, I can't stand those ads, they are such a load of rubbish

Kelly: Oh they're boring

Alicia: At first I thought it was like some genuine thing, like because they don't look like normal ads, but then it's like a sponge or cloth, or this foil is much better than any other foil, it's supported by Brand Power

The tag line for Brand Power commercials is 'Facts and Value' and the promoters of Brand Power market the ad segment as providing rational information about grocery products (Buchanan Group Pty Ltd, 2005) The above extract highlights the power of televisual codes to generate meaning. Alicia identified the Brand Power ads (and the Yakult ad) as stylistically different to other ads. Without clearly articulating it, she read the codes employed in the ad consistent with their meaning in other textual forms, namely news and documentary, where they signify truth and objectivity. This reading contributed to her initial understanding of the advertising address as 'genuine'. However repeated exposure to Brand Power commercials undermined this early interpretation as the mundane purpose and content of the ads became evident.

Central to the construction of truth and objectivity in the Yakult ad, is the signification of science. Opening references to factual scientific knowledge are extended as microbiologist, Doctor Conway, is introduced (Figure 26).

Figure 26

Doctor Conway is readily interpreted as a knowledgeable expert, embodying scientific and medical values. Her white coat and the laboratory setting, including all manner of research paraphernalia such as Petri dishes and specimen jars, provide viewers with familiar icons consistent with popular notions about the activities and goals of science. These themes are continued throughout the ad, and in a later scene Doctor Conway is shown peering through a microscope (Figure 27) as she gives advice about "how to identify a genuine probiotic product". The view through the microscope of multiplying bacteria is subsequently presented (Figure 28) in a way that is reminiscent of an educational program. If seeing is believing, then under the weight of this incontrovertible evidence there can be no doubt as to the validity of Doctor Conway's advice. Importantly, Doctor Conway herself makes no mention of Yakult (this is done by the presenter), thereby maintaining an air of scientific impartiality.

Figure 27

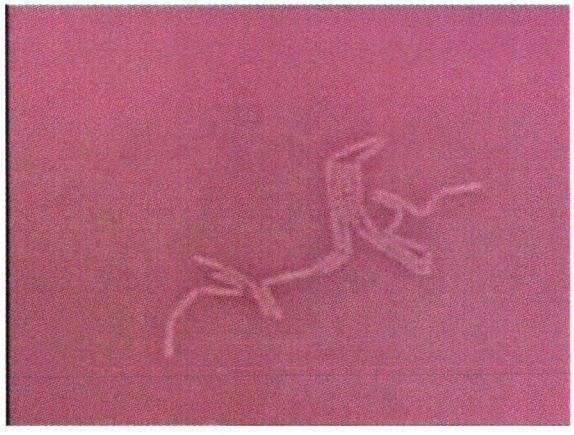

Figure 28

Applying the commutation test, to consider how the meanings generated change if a male instead of a female scientist were represented, is revealing. A female scientist not only fosters greater identification with female consumers, but also seems more trustworthy and less threatening than a male figure might. The representation of a female scientist also works to counter the negative connotations of science as exploitative, controlling, patriarchal, authoritative, oppressive and unethical. While Doctor Conway applies scientific rationality, she remains educative and caring, consistent with more traditional female roles.

Through unambiguous references to science, Yakult is constructed as medicinal in nature. As a good example of a functional food (or nutraceutical), Yakult is marketed not on the basis of its nutritional value but as having other health promoting properties (related to the presence of 'good' bacteria in the intestines). The actual beneficial or medicinal properties of Yakult are stated in vague terms only, perhaps due to advertising regulations restricting the use of health claims in food advertising (Australia New Zealand Food Authority, 2002). The most explicit health claims are made in the captions which supplement the images throughout the ad. For example, the caption which appears when Doctor Conway is first introduced (see Figure 26), states that "Yakult is a probiotic, healthy, family drink". In this same shot, the subsequent caption reads "probiotics=live, beneficial bacteria", and the connection is made between Yakult as a "genuine probiotic product" and the promotion of good health. The viewer is also told that "Yakult's unique shirota strain arrives alive in the intestines making it an exceptional source of quality probiotics", with no real explanation of what a probiotic is or what it supposedly does. With only vague, unsubstantiated verbal references to health, it is fair to say that most of the healthy appeal of the product comes from the connotative value of science and medicine as signified in the ad and supported by the factual style of the ad.

Other aspects of the products' marketing such as packaging and flavour also contribute to this construction of Yakult. Accordingly, Sharon argued that the unusual taste of the product and the small dose-like servings contributed to her construal of the product as medicinal. This interpretation was reiterated by other participants in the singles group with comments such as:

"It must be good for you because it's so shit"
"I think Yakult, tastes like shit, gotta be good"
"Yakult's so disgusting that it's got to be good for you"
"I think Yakult's like buying vitamin pills"

The Yakult ad has a very different presentational style to the other ads in this study. While it is quite clearly an ad, it more resembles a news article or documentary programme in style and form. The tone of the advertisement is serious and the product is marketed almost solely on the basis of its supposed health giving properties. The ad makes apparently complex, information based health appeals, reflecting the product's borderline status as a dietary supplement rather than a food. This said, as we will see later when discussing the Yoplait Optimal ad, the value of Yakult as healthy and medicinal is not inherent to the product, but a marketing construction.

Yoplait Lite

Yoplait Lite is a range of low fat flavoured yoghurts. The 15 second Yoplait Lite ad, tells the story told of a young French woman returning home from market. As she walks, it seems that cats everywhere are drawn to her, but why? All is revealed in the final voiceover "all lovers of creaminess will love creamier Yoplait Lite". Just as the young woman loves the creamy texture of Yoplait Lite, so do the cats that have gathered outside her apartment window.

Many signifiers are employed in combination to deliver the ultimate meaning of 'Frenchness'. Figure 29 is a frame from the opening shot of the ad in which a young woman is shown walking down a lane. In the background various signifiers of French

culture can be seen. Dining tables with white table cloths line the alley. Upon one of the tables sits a carafe of white wine. Beside the table stands a portly waiter dressed in a long-sleeved white shirt and black vest. The blackboards in the background are covered in French writing. The seductive music which overlays the ad is distinctly French and the occasional phrase such as *je t'aime* can be distinguished. If the viewer was in any doubt as to the meaning of all this, the closing voiceover is delivered in a faux French accent.

Figure 29

While the signification of Frenchness is meaningful because Yoplait is well known as a French company (as in the familiar advertising phrase "Yoplait, it's French for yoghurt"), some specific connotations of Frenchness are transferred to the product. Amongst participants there was some discussion about the French meanings in the ad:

Beth: I was thinking they like to play on the French bit with yoghurt don't they, I suppose partly because they're the French company, but, it's a selling point as well isn't it, it's immediately sexy, Paris, French

Sharon: Well it's sort of the most romantic country in the whole world isn't it, one of

Beth: And for some reason that just goes with yoghurt (laughs)

Beth laughed here because she realised that there is no natural relationship between French and yoghurt. The relationship exists only within the frame of Yoplait ads through the juxtaposition of the product with signifiers of Frenchness. Importantly, not all aspects of French culture are associated with the advertised product, and in the above extract Beth and Sharon identified two specific aspects of French culture that are connoted in the ad: 'sexy' and 'romantic'.

The cats are another important signifier within the ad. It is not just a love of creaminess that is shared by the young woman and the cats; they are wholly a metaphor for her. Participants readily recognised this describing the young woman as an "alley cat" and a "dirty cat". Within the ad, femininity is portrayed through felinity. The young woman's identification with the cats is clear as she smiles at them through her apartment window. In the closing shot of the woman, she appears unmistakably cat-like as head-phones conceal her (human) ears while she licks yoghurt from the container lid (see Figure 30).

Figure 30

References to health are very subtle in the Yoplait Lite ad. The product is first introduced when the young (French) woman who features in the ad sets down her purchases upon returning home (presumably from a shopping outing).

Figure 31

Figure 32

Figure 31 shows the last frame of a pan shot which begins from the left of the frame. As the woman places the bag on the table the camera pans quickly right to reveal the yoghurt which has spilled out of the bag and on to the table. Figure 32 is a frame from the final shot of the advertisement — a still shot, filmed from the opposite side of the table to Figure 31, in order to show the cats in the background (which gaze hungrily at the yoghurt). In both frames, the yoghurt is displayed alongside a white crochet bag which overflows with fresh produce. While the yoghurt has (conveniently) spilled out of the bag it remains enveloped by the bag so that it clearly forms part of the bag's contents. Through this apparently simple placement of the product, the yoghurt is simultaneously constructed as both like and unlike the fruit and vegetables in the bag. The juxtaposition works to suggest that Yoplait Lite is a marketplace product, akin to colourful, exotic and healthy, fresh fruit and vegetables. At the same time, the yoghurt is clearly distinct from the fresh fruit and vegetables. It is physically separated from the produce by the bag. Participants in the singles group construed the yoghurt as a *naughty* treat, in contrast to the *good* fruit and vegetables. Yoplait Lite is appealing because it provides a simple solution to the ongoing dilemma of balancing good and bad food. The product performs its magic by absolving the consumer of any guilt

associated with eating creamy, naughty food, while still promising the pleasure of indulgence.

Yoplait Optimal

Yoplait Optimal is a similar product to Yakult – a "probiotic yoghurt drink". The Optimal ad is 30 seconds long. As with the Yoplait Lite ad, the Yoplait Optimal ad makes heavy use of symbols of French culture. The opening scene of the Optimal ad is of a rich-looking Parisian drawing room. Like the Yoplait Lite ad, warm red and brown tones characterise the scene. A window slides open and a masked figure, clad in black from head to toe, climbs through the window and into the room. Sirens wail from the street below. In the background, through the open window, the Eiffel Tower can be seen (Figure 33).

Figure 33

As the supposed burglar enters the room a television can be heard in the background and the voices are clearly speaking French. The burglar leans close to a man who unwittingly lies sleeping on a couch. In one movement the burglar unmasks to reveal herself and kisses the man on the forehead (Figure 34). This is the viewer's first clue that the woman is in her own home and not out stealing. Her identity as a wife and mother is further elaborated as she lays down her mask upon a mantelpiece where several family photographs are on display; she is recognisable in at least one of the pictures (Figure 35). Finally, as she walks to the refrigerator, the woman stoops to pick up a toy duck left lying on the floor (Figure 36). At this point, the audience is reminded that burglary is not the woman's only job. While picking up the toy duck she says in a mock French accent "in my line of work I'm constantly on the run, which means I don't always look after myself, so I try to do one good deed every day".

Figure 34

Figure 35

Figure 36

As the woman takes a bottle of Optimal from the refrigerator, a male voiceover, with a similar French accent, espouses the health benefits of Optimal: "new Yoplait Optimal is a delicious probiotic yoghurt drink, with active cultures and natural antioxidants to help your digestive system". In the final shot of the ad (Figure 37), the product is displayed amongst the night's spoils. The voiceover says "Yoplait Optimal, a good deed for your body".

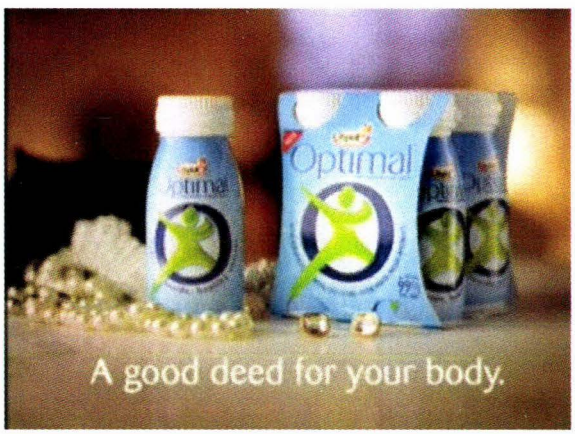

Figure 37

On an intertextual level, the Optimal ad is in a paradigmatic relationship with the Yakult ad; the products fit within the same category and are therefore defined in relation to one another, in terms of what each is not (Optimal ≠ Yakult). Because the products are essentially the same, the effective marketing of each product (including advertising, packaging and presentation) must work to distinguish it from the other. It is the purpose of advertising to create a unique identity and meaning structure for products with a high degree of functional similarity. As Williamson (1978) argues:

"There is very little real difference between brands of product within any category... Therefore it is the first function of an advertisement to *create* a differentiation between one particular product and others in the same category. It does this by providing the product with an 'image'; this image only succeeds in differentiating between products in so far as *it* is part of a system of differences. The identity of anything depends more on what it is *not* than what it is, since boundaries are primarily distinctions: and there are no 'natural' distinctions between most products" (p. 24).

Consequently, the Optimal ad contrasts starkly with the Yakult ad. The Optimal ad does not focus so much on the health related properties of the product as does the Yakult ad. While the Yakult ad is cold and educational in style, the Optimal ad is warm and narrative based (this narrative style is typical of Yoplait ads generally). The similarity (and dissimilarity) of the Optimal and Yakult products was immediately noted by participants, and clearly informed their understanding of both products, as demonstrated in the extract below.

Beth: Yeah it's being the cool version of Yakult
Keryn: It's the same product, it's a probiotic
Jane: Tastes better than Yakult
Sharon: Have you tried it?
Jane: They say it, no because they tell us

Gina: See I'd rather get that than the Yakult one
Sharon: Do they say it tastes better then?
Jane: They say it's delicious la, la, la, la, la, la and you think oh it's like Yakult but it tastes nicer
Sharon: Oh, they don't say it's nicer than Yakult
Gina: And the packaging is nicer too
Keryn: It's a sexy little bottle isn't it
Gina: Yeah
Jane: Well, yeah, but then I think Yakult, tastes like shit, gotta be good
Sharon: But I haven't bought it, I've gone back to Yakult
Keryn: This is a very new product
Sharon: It is, and I've seen it on the shelf
Keryn: Would you think... what did you think of it?
Sharon: Next to Yakult
Keryn: And why don't you pick this one up?
Sharon: I don't know but I didn't
Jane: Do you think Yakult's more disgusting?
Beth: It is more expensive, Yakult looks really industrial kind of
Sharon: I don't think I looked at the price, I just decided that it was better
Jane: Yakult's so disgusting that it's got to be good for you
Sharon: But it's just yeah, but then I have to say I was like this (gestures indecision)
Beth: Yeah I think Yakult's like buying vitamin pills or something, it's that level, whereas that would be...
Keryn: Sexy vitamins
Jane: Slightly more like yoghurt
Sharon: Yeah and I know, you know why I think it's, it's probably I, probably I didn't buy it, I think that I probably would've gone for a bigger tub of yoghurt, because it was more yoghurty, so it's only diddy yoghurt, whereas Yakult is like a proper medicine, so the little Yoplait is like just a small fucking yoghurt, you know, I might as well buy a proper big yoghurt, 'cos it's probably got as much in it, so I went away from Yoplait
Keryn: So you were not looking for yoghurt that day you wanted the probiotics
Sharon: Yeah if I wanted yoghurt I would have got the tub of yoghurt, whatever, whatever it would be, or if I was going for healthy, something for every morning, basically, before you go to work every morning, Yakult

This extract highlights how the meaning of a product is in part derived from its relationship to other similar products. As the newer product, Yoplait Optimal was defined by participants through comparison to Yakult. The warmer style of the Optimal ad made the product seem "nicer", both in terms of appearance and taste, than the more "industrial" Yakult. Yakult was also perceived as more healthy and medicinal than Optimal. Notably, the way in which both products were understood by participants is consistent with how the products are marketed.

The Yoplait Optimal ad constructs the product as convenient and healthy. Like Healthy Choice, Optimal provides the 'woman on the run' with a simple way to look after herself. The ad very much revolves around the dichotomy of good versus bad. The construction of the product as a "good deed" has particular moral implications and these are discussed in the third section, Food Health and Morality.

Summary

While there is definitely some commonality across ads in how health is constructed, the Yakult ad remains quite distinct. In the Yakult ad, health is constructed through reference to science and medicine. Even the form of the ad, with its stylistic similarity to news and documentary, is intended to promote an interpretation of the product as legitimate. The Yakult ad represents health as entirely biological in nature. In this respect, the Yakult ad contrasts markedly with the other ads shown to the singles group. In these other ads the associated benefits of health, not health itself, are marketed. For example, like the Yakult ad, the So Good ad makes strong appeals to health, however these are given social currency in lifestyle terms; So Good is not just healthy, it is a means to achieving a good life that can be actively enjoyed. The obligation to 'look after yourself' is central to both the Healthy Choice and Yoplait Optimal ads, while the Special K ad employs the highly similar concept of 'keeping in shape'. The Healthy Choice ad explicitly offers the removal of guilt (associated with not looking after yourself) while the Yoplait Lite ad does so more implicitly.

Notably, health is rarely the main selling feature of the advertised products. With the exception of the Yakult and So Good ads, health is constructed as secondary to other product features such as convenience or ease (Healthy Choice, Lean Cuisine, Special K and Optimal), taste (Lean Cuisine) and indulgence (Yoplait Lite). Outside of this study, apart from those products which are typically marketed as indulgent treats (such as ice cream, chocolate, biscuits and alcohol), most food ads pitched at women for their own consumption (rather than food for the family), attempt to construct the advertised product as healthy. However, perhaps due this value saturation, health alone is rarely sufficient as a marketing appeal and other values must be constructed for products. The pervasiveness of health appeals in food advertising suggests the social importance of health in relation to food, but is perhaps also due to advances in food manufacturing processes (foods can easily be nutritionally enriched, and artificial sweeteners and thickeners can be used in place of sugars and fats), and increased competition between food manufacturers. It seems that health as a marketing value for food products is essential yet insufficient.

Having explored how health is constructed in terms of what is fairly explicit in the ads, we can now tease out and explore some of the more implicit meanings within the ads, beginning with the relationship between health and beauty.

Health and Beauty

Within the advertisements targeted at single women, there is remarkable fluidity between the notions of 'healthy eating' and 'low fat', such that only in the Yakult ad does the fat content of the product *not* feature. In the Healthy Choice, Lean Cuisine and Yoplait Lite ads, the primary health appeal relates to the fat content of the respective products. The question is raised: Are these ads not more about beauty than health? Body weight and shape are central to popular understandings of both health and beauty; both the healthy body and the beautiful body are slim, toned and youthful. The essence of the meaningful relationship between health and beauty is neatly captured in the following extract from the singles discussion:

Jane: If you walk into a gym or you walk into an aerobics class do you really want to see someone with cellulite, I don't, I want to see a fit bastard who I hate because I don't

like doing aerobics, I don't like the way they look but, I've had, I've been in a yoga class or a pilates class where someone's been a bit like, well just like me, and I'm like, well what the fuck am I doing here?

Sharon: How am I gonna get any better?

Jane: Yes if they're the teachers? I want the teachers to be perfect, I want the teachers to look good

Gina: Well they should be

Beth: I agree with you there

~

Sharon: that person in your class who is your yoga teacher probably works very hard but isn't able to make themselves look any better

Beth: Well, in that case, why am I bothering to do the class

Jane: That's what I think...

Sharon: No, but you're contradicting what you've just said

Beth: I want to get fit

Sharon: You said I don't want to see all these beautiful people in magazines, number one, you said that, number two, and I agreed with you, you said you don't want to see some cellulite person

Jane: I said that

Sharon: Beth's agreed to it, she doesn't want to see it either, but that's really unfair, you don't know whether that's the best that person could be, now that person, if she didn't go to yoga...

Gina: No you don't, but you're paying to go to the class

Sharon: I know but isn't she contradicting, isn't she basically saying

Beth: I know what you're saying...

Sharon: I'm sort of saying...

Beth: ...but, I don't agree with you because I believe that doing yoga and doing exercise and if you're professional at it you wouldn't have fat rolling around

Sharon: No I agree too that should happen, but...

Jane: See I've said this to Pete...

Sharon: ...but is it really fair because you don't know do you

Jane: ...that if I started doing loads of exercise I don't think it would change my body, If I thought I could look...

Gina: Of course it would

Sharon: we're assuming, we're assuming that we'll all get rid of the cellulite if we exercise

Jane: I know, but I've got, I know, I kind of know that but I assume that I have to do it four times a week hard exercise before I even see a change, and that's why I can't even cope with it, he's like 'oh you're ridiculous, you would see change', and if I know that I would do it, I can't have the long term goal in my mind, it's my mind that's fucked up, to get actually, physically out there, doing it, um, it was an unusual Special K advert wasn't' it, 'cos there's loads of Special K adverts where they're floating around in a red dress on the beach and they all look gorgeous, well they do look good

In this extract, participants clearly regarded a slim body as an index of fitness and health. Moreover, a slim body is central to how female beauty is defined. In Western society, exercise and eating are the two major cultural institutions through which the body is managed. As Lupton (1996) argues, food, as it relates to the body, is a major site of meaningful intersection between the notions of health and beauty. Lupton labels this axis of meaning the "food / health / beauty triplex" (p. 137); she provides a culturally embedded illustration of how food, health and beauty are inter-related:

"The fat body is not just unhealthy, it is ugly. From this perspective, the body, as outward symbol of the self, must be marketed to others, and therefore must be as conventionally attractive as possible to maximize its exchange value. In consumer culture, the body as commodity requires a host of other commodities for its maintenance and preservation. These include food products to keep the body youthful, dynamic, muscular and slim, such as low-fat foods, slimming products and body-building preparations" (Lupton, 1996, p. 140).

Here Lupton suggests that beauty and health are not really such distinct notions, and beauty is taken to signify health. From this perspective it is easy to regard the relationship between health and beauty (in terms of body weight) as natural. Body weight certainly has currency as a real health issue in affluent Western society. For example, an Australian Government website describes obesity in Australia as an epidemic, and "one of the biggest public health problems facing Australian adults and children today" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2004). Another Government website warns that "obesity rates in Australia have more than doubled over the past 20 years. Around seven million Australians are either overweight or obese... At this rate, it's thought that about 75 per cent of the Australian population will be overweight or obese by 2020" (State Government of Victoria, 2004). For Campos (2004), the treatment of obesity as a major health concern, is "a witch-hunt masquerading as a public health initiative" (p. xvii). Campos argues that the link between body weight and health is not as clear or strong as is widely believed, and there are many confounding variables (such as level of physical activity, type of dietary fat consumed, composition of body tissue, age, sex, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status). The dissatisfaction with body weight, particularly for women, that is fostered through the construction of a fat body as unhealthy, serves only the economic interests of the diet and health industries, leading Campos to conclude that "the war on fat, which is supposedly about making all of us healthy, is really about making some of us rich" (Campos, 2004, p. xix).

At the other end of the body weight spectrum, but perhaps a greater health concern, is the obsession with thinness that characterises eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. Importantly, these illnesses do not affect the general population in the same way that obesity does, and it is generally accepted that women are much more likely to be affected by anorexia and bulimia than men. While the prevalence of eating disorders in the general population is low, for at risk groups, namely young women, the problem is serious. In 2000-01, 16% of all hospitalisations for mental and behavioural disorders in Australian women aged 12-24 were due to eating disorders (Women's Health Queensland Wide Inc, 2005). This statistic is concerning, particularly if it is assumed that hospitalisations represent only a small percentage of those affected. Moreover, while rates of diagnosed eating disorder are low, the negative body image associated with eating disorders is frighteningly normal amongst women and growing more common amongst men. According to the State Government of Victoria (2000) "it is common in Western nations for women to believe they are larger and fatter than they really are. Only one in five women are satisfied with their body weight. Nearly half of all normal weight women overestimate their size and shape... [and] approximately nine out of 10 young Australian women have dieted at least once in their lives".

While obesity and eating disorders may seem like quite separate issues, Kilbourne (1999) argues that our modern obsession with thinness and dieting is characterised by the same poor eating habits that lead to obesity. Not surprisingly, Kilbourne sees the

diet and junk food industries as interdependent. Others have argued that the Western preoccupation with weight is fuelled by a stereotype of overweight people as unattractive, self-indulgent and lazy (Stephens, Hill, & Hanson, 1994). In this context, body weight is seen as an outward expression of moral virtue and self-control:

"In the old days, bad girls got pregnant. These days they get fat – and are more scorned, shamed, and despised than ever before. Prejudice against fat people, especially against fat women, is one of the few remaining prejudices that is socially acceptable. This strikes fear into the hearts of most women, who are terrified of inspiring revulsion and ridicule. And this contributes mightily, of course, to the obsession with thinness that has gripped our culture for many years" (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 115).

It is difficult, if not impossible, to identify a causal link between advertising and female body dissatisfaction in a society in which girls are socialised from a young age to understand that the main function of their bodies is to attract others (Stephens et al., 1994). Nor is it the thesis of this study that advertising can generate meanings without a social context for making sense of them. While advertising cannot be entirely blamed for women's obsession with thinness, it is nonetheless seen to play a major role in constructing and perpetuating a thin ideal body for women. Importantly, advertising naturalises women's concern with body weight. In the ads viewed by the singles group, monitoring one's diet is constructed as an essential and normal part of independent female living. In the Lean Cuisine, Healthy Choice, Yoplait Lite and Special K advertisements, the fat content of the products is made to seem incidental, although it is actually central to the dominant reading of each ad.

The Lean Cuisine ad appeals to the good taste, quality and convenience of the product, however these attributes are only surprising – and therefore a selling point – because the product is "lean" ("it's not just lean, it's cuisine"). The ad equates health with watching what you eat (or in Beth's words, obsessing about food), and only the fat content of the product is given any importance as a health issue. While any relationship between the fat content of food and health is not explicitly stated within the advertisement, references to "lean" and "97% fat free" undoubtedly produce health related connotations. The way in which the characters are portrayed in relation to one another suggests that the low fat content of the product is valuable in itself and eating low fat food offers the consumer a kind of moral high ground. On this basis, Beth introduced the idea that the women in the ad are competing with one another:

Jane: that actually looks quite nice in a bowl
Sharon: I agree I've had such shit, excuse my French, at some of the places I go to at lunch time, because I don't make my own sandwiches, and say you've had chicken, so much chicken fat and chicken skin, I've literally taken out half my sandwich and thrown it in the bin and gone, number one, why aren't I making my own sandwiches, I'm too lazy, number two, why don't I just have Lean Cuisine or whatever that was in the bowl, which one was that?
Beth: That was Lean Cuisine yeah
Sharon: Lean Cuisine, why don't I just take Lean Cuisine to work, stick it in the microwave, at least I'll enjoy it, now I think that that's what that's saying, it's enjoyable and it's quick
Jane: I think it's also saying, that actually looks quite nice in a bowl
Sharon: Yeah it does look quite nice

Beth: I see that as saying, nah, nah, nah, I can eat all this and not put on weight, and the other one's saying she'd have to eat biscuits and that
Jane: And all the people looked shocked
Sharon: Oh, you're absolutely right, yes, that's what the adverts saying you're right
Keryn: Do you think that the comparison with the three biscuits isn't just a matter of 'I've been in such a rush that I've had three biscuits' but that there's a bit of a parallel drawn in terms of the amount of fat in the food, between 'you can eat three biscuits or you can eat this'
Beth: Yeah
Sharon: Completely
Keryn: Okay
Beth: And they're obviously bloody food obsessed those girls and I don't like that

Beth's interpretation is supported by the construction of shots featuring the two women. The first woman ("I had two deadlines and three biscuits"), dressed in black, peers from over a computer monitor and is shot from a high angle (Figure 38) while the second women ("I had Italian style vegetables..."), dressed in white, is shot openly and from a low angle (Figure 39).

Figure 38

Figure 39

Characters shot from a high angle are visually diminished and in accordance with filmic convention are read as having less power and status, whereas characters shot from a low angle appear visually large, with connotations of power and authority. While viewers of this ad probably have no conscious awareness of the codes of shot selection, they are nonetheless able to interpret a shot, or series of shots, consistent with these codes. Through the construction of this series of shots, the achievement of a thin body (through the consumption of Lean Cuisine) becomes a site of competition and a way of measuring worth. The woman who had Lean Cuisine for lunch is boastful as if proud of her achievement. She is elevated in the eyes of the ad viewer and given superior status over other women in the ad.

In the Healthy Choice ad, rather than competing against other women, the female protagonist battles her own guilt. A great deal of ideological work is done through the voiceover:

"you probably should take better care of your skin, and your feet, and your car, and your plants, and you definitely should take better care of your parents, but at least you can take care of

yourself without feeling guilty, because your favourite Asian noodle soups are now 97 percent fat free... McCain Healthy Choice... is looking after yourself".

The phrase "you can take care of yourself without feeling guilty" implies that women, such as the woman in the ad and those who are addressed as consumers, *should* otherwise feel guilty for taking care of themselves. Through the parallel construction of the ad, eating is equated with other taken for granted chores such as cleaning the car and watering the plants, and the product is inserted as the quick and easy solution to getting the job done. Moreover, if to "take care of yourself without feeling guilty" is to eat fat free soup, then taking care of yourself otherwise must mean indulging in fatty food. Thereby the consumption of fatty food is unquestionably constructed as guilt evoking. Women are placed in a bind in that they must look after themselves but not so well as to become guilty of self-indulgence or worse, gluttony.

In the Yoplait Lite ad the value of the product's purported creaminess depends upon the viewer's understanding that (1) creaminess is normally equated with fattiness; and (2) the fat content of the product is reduced (as indicated by the term 'Lite' in the product's name). Whether other similar reduced-fat products are as creamy as Yoplait Lite is unimportant. It is the connotative value of creaminess which is important, and evoking creamy connotations (such as naughtiness, pleasure and indulgence), is the main work of the ad.

Finally, the Special K ad is especially interesting because it seems to oppose diet culture, instead proffering the product as "a simpler way to keep in shape". The ad recognises and apparently challenges the faddish nature of dieting which is represented by the stack of discarded diet and exercise books. Against this backdrop, Special K is positioned as the antithesis of diet culture and a space is created for the product as the straightforward (and by implication, effective), solution to maintaining a slim figure.

While seeming to challenge diet culture, the Special K ad continues to focus on the achievement of shapeliness by reducing the goal of eating well and exercising to one of keeping in shape. To appreciate the ideological complexity of the Special K ad it is necessary to consider the context in which the ad has meaning for its audience. When discussing the Special K ad, participants made frequent reference to previous commercials for the product, as in the following extract:

Beth: I thought it was alright
Sharon: I think that I've seen better Special K adverts, but as I say, it's fun, it's harmless
Gina: There's the one, the one where she's wearing a short skirt, and, and, have you seen that?
Beth: Yeah
Gina: And they make a K out of her shoes, she's wearing like high stilettos
Sharon: I think there are some very sophisticated Special K adverts
Beth: I hate the latest one though with the woman that's just (smiles vacantly and laughs), and she's walking to breakfast and she's, oh I don't know, it's all about, it's about older couples isn't it with the man still fancying her because she's so slim...
Beth: So it's saying how to keep your husband, eat Special K
Keryn: You refute the meanings that it's giving to you in relation to...

Beth Yeah, Special K to me always has said 'diet', so I don't buy it because I'm never on a diet

For Beth, Special K was synonymous with dieting and the promotion of a thin ideal body shape for women. More importantly, she saw that within Special K ads, the achievement and maintenance of a slim body is equated with social approval and acceptance, particularly in the form of male attraction. The woman who eats Special K is magically enabled to wear a short skirt or tight jeans - to look younger and sexier, thereby winning the approval of a man. What is purchased then is not just the promise of a shapely body, but one which is sexually desirable.

The newer "Keep it simple" ad for Special K must recognise and address these existing meanings in order for the preferred reading to come through. On the surface, the newer ad appears very different to others for the product. Special K ads typically comprise a short narrative featuring a female protagonist. The product is presented as the solution to her specific dilemma and the means by which she achieves the approval of men. By contrast, the "Keep it simple" ad does not feature people at all and the absence of a female 'figure' is notable. The ad mocks diet and exercise regimens in an attempt to distance the product from faddish diet culture, which has come to be seen negatively. The ad also attempts to build an empathic relationship with viewers by recognising their constant and unsuccessful struggle to lose weight through dieting, and offering a "simple" solution. Special K is thereby constructed as "the champion of the victimized subject" while retaining an edge against competitors who are constructed as the victimisers (Pedersen, 2002). At the same time the "Keep it simple" ad does not really represent much of a break with previous ads for Special K which have typically emphasised shapeliness – often with the K being used to represent a woman's shapely leg or body. The ad continues to focus on the achievement of shapeliness by reducing the goal of eating well and exercising to one of keeping in shape. By specifically targeting the diet and body conscious consumer, the ad simultaneously promotes and exploits women's fear of becoming fat. Importantly, the end goal remains to "keep in shape" – a powerfully ambiguous phrase. To be in shape is to be physically fit or in good physical condition, and on the surface, this is what the Special K ad promotes. However, being in shape also implies bodily shapeliness and a slim figure. This double meaning is certainly intentional, particularly when combined with references to diet culture from earlier in the ad. The advertisers could easily have made a less ambiguous appeal to health but perhaps this would not have been in their best interests, for as Kilbourne (1999) notes, sales of low-fat products depend on the continued preoccupation of consumers with thinness.

So what is happening in these advertisements for which health appeals are underpinned by constructions of beauty in the form a thin body? Naomi Wolf's (1990) discussion of "The Beauty Myth" offers insight into the ideological function of the discourses at work in these advertisements. Wolf talks of how following the widespread liberation of women beginning in the early 1970s, images of female beauty stifled women's advancement and sense of freedom. "The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us" (Wolf, 1990, p. 10). Wolf calls this ideology "the beauty myth" and argues that the body, and food as it relates to the body, are central to discourses which function to strip women of power by devaluing them and undermining their self worth:

"The sexual revolution promoted the discovery of female sexuality; "beauty pornography" – which for the first time in women's history artificially links a commodified "beauty" directly and explicitly to sexuality – invaded the mainstream to undermine women's new and vulnerable sense of sexual self-worth. Reproductive rights gave Western women control over our own bodies; the weight of fashion models plummeted to 23 percent below that of ordinary women, eating disorders rose exponentially, and a mass neurosis was promoted that used food and weight to strip women of that sense of control" (Wolf, 1990, p. 11).

As the notions of health and beauty have increasingly aligned, the beauty myth has become not only more pervasive but also more insidious. For while the pursuit of beauty is seen as frivolous, vain and small-minded, the pursuit of health is seen as disciplined, self-motivated and socially responsible. In short, as the beauty myth has evolved to encompass health meanings, it has become more robust, and less subject to critical deconstruction and rejection.

Pedersen (2002) talks of the commodity of guilt relief in advertisements which "frame themselves as a champion of the victimized subject" (p. 169). She offers a critical analysis of two Canadian advertisements for Special K which appeared in women's magazines as part of a campaign entitled *Look good on your own terms*. One ad featured a man dressed in clothes too small for him with the title "If only designers had to live up to the same standards they set for us". The other ad depicted a very thin woman posing in a swimsuit accompanied by the text "If this is beauty, there's something wrong with the eye of the beholder". Pedersen concluded that:

"These advertisements are not about cereal. They cash into the socio-political controversy about how women have lost control of body image to advertisers. They are interesting, topical, intriguing and empathetic, and they prompt interaction with the viewer. And most importantly they reward with the removal of guilt... [which] gives the consumer a reprieve that she rarely receives. The... campaign allows the socially aware viewer to pat herself on the back for placing herself in agreement with this advertisement, but it also lets her pursue an image of the ideal body (embedded in the very same advertisement) and still maintain a feminist dignity" (p. 180).

Pedersen argues that while appearing to challenge the overly slim ideal body image which advertisements generally construct for women, the Special K campaign constructs ambiguity which actually works to reinforce the very messages which it superficially seems to oppose.

Notably, in none of the ads included in this study is beauty made salient – certainly not in an explicit way. On the whole, the ads might even be regarded as liberating in how they represent women. Both the Healthy Choice and Lean Cuisine ads offer representations of independent, working women. The So Good ad has a definite 'women can do anything' theme; women are shown engaged is unusual physical activities such as learning to surf and jumping on a Velcro wall. In the Yakult ad, a woman scientist offers nutritional advice, while in the Optimal ad, the female protagonist successfully juggles family commitments with a surprising career of thievery. In all cases the female role is functional rather than ornamental. While the women in these ads are reasonably attractive, in none of these ads is beauty explicitly used as a selling point. Yet beauty emerged in the focus group discussion as an issue for the women who are the target consumers of the advertised products. The thread of

meaningful relatedness was health – body (weight/slimness) – beauty. Thus for women, the evocation of health meanings triggers beauty meanings. The terms *health* and *beauty* are not mutually exclusive and to some extent contain overlapping meanings, such that the pursuit of health has come to mask the pursuit of beauty through the attainment of thinness. Health is a socially endorsed goal which can be legitimately pursued, while thinness for the sake of beauty is less acceptable. This is how the Special K ad operates and why it appeals. It replaces the representation of beautiful, thin women – the prize of men – as an ideal to be achieved, with a more subtle plug to promote 'keeping in shape' as the healthy goal. While the images of beauty are missing, the discourses and supporting ideology remain intact. As achieving and maintaining a thin body is seen to be more about health than beauty, there is less critical space available for challenging the value of a thin ideal.

Having said this, participants were not entirely uncritical in how they regarded the representation of women in advertising. Beth, in particular, actively rejected and challenged the discourses at work in representations of beautiful women.

Beth: I don't like the beautiful women because I think that, not everybody is innately beautiful is what they're trying to say, is that if you buy this product you buy into this beautiful image, and I don't like the fact that we're all expected to come up to this ideal of beauty

Sharon: I disagree with you because...

Jane: A lot of people are life aspirational though

Sharon: I mean, I know that I'm probably sort of on the average scale of there and everybody's up here and is down there, we're all on a scale of what we perceptually think of as beauty as we look at the people with the long beautiful legs and you know, the perfect shape or whatever, however, I know that I've got a scale that's within myself, where I can be perfect, within myself, be three quarters, a half, and probably, you know, I've put on a bit too much weight, so as Jane just said, I've got my own internal aspirations to be my perfect goal, now, I would rather see a beautiful person, with beautiful legs, than some fat bitch, with cellulite...

Jane: It wouldn't work

Sharon: ...advertising Special K

Gina: You can't sell it, you can't sell...

Beth: But they didn't have anyone beautiful in that ad and we all liked it

Sharon: True

Jane: But they usually do though Special K

Beth: I know, I know

Jane: ...they always have people who are (inaudible)

Beth: And that's why I don't like it

Jane: They're usually beautiful without being too beautiful

Sharon: I understand what you're saying, but they are adverts, and you can't get away from that

Beth: No I know, I know, but it is in our face all the time...

Sharon: It is too, you're right

Gina: It's just like that though, you know

Beth: ...I think more than any other generation we've all watched telly so much more, and there's so many beautiful people just in our faces, what do people expect?

Jane: Oh yeah, and magazines, that's why people blame them on anorexia and stuff

Beth: Yeah

Sharon: Well I mean, look, at the state of the television programs with the Botox and this and the makeovers, and we're all thinking about it, I'm sorry I would personally, I'm quite happy to have an eyebrow raise, have this done, you know, have the whole, because there are..

Gina: I'd go Botox for this wrinkle right here

Sharon: Exactly, Botox this and the other, we all look at them and go, oh, stupid people for having it done

Keryn: But...

Sharon: But we secretly go, well actually, I'll have this, this and this, but now Beth would probably never think that

Beth: Well it's only because these images are telling you that this is what you should be thinking like

Sharon Yes, and I agree with that, I'm agreeing with you, we're getting brainwashed

Keryn: But you can think that and then recognise it as a cultural thing, not something internal to you, and chose to reject it

Beth: What worries me is that other people have an expectation of me that I'm supposed to live up to this ideal...

Jane: It's damaging to men

Keryn: People are not rejecting it

Beth: ...whether I choose to or not

Jane: Have you looked at men's magazines

Keryn: Sure, because that's what your society, your culture expects

Sharon: But the men must be pretty gorgeous in men's magazines

Jane: No our magazines are full of women, men's magazines are full of women

In this extract, participants struggled to reconcile what they regarded as their own health and beauty related goals with the idealised representations that feature in advertising. Their sense of simultaneous discomfort and identification with these figures was expressed in that they both rationalised and condemned media messages associated with the attainment of beauty. Interestingly, participants defined beauty primarily in terms of body weight. For example, in the extract above, Sharon defined the antithesis of perfection as having "put on a bit too much weight" and went on to say "I would rather see a beautiful person, with beautiful legs, than some fat bitch, with cellulite". Sharon not only implied that overweight people are not beautiful, but that a "bit too much weight" is all that is needed to tip the beauty scales. Moreover, Sharon naturalised this definition of beauty by framing it as an innate preference.

On the whole, participants accepted the cultural valuation of physical beauty, as they saw it reflecting their own attitudes and desires. Along with this acceptance, came an attitude of resignation: "they are adverts, and you can't get away from that". At the same time, advertising was seen as manipulative and powerful in an almost hypodermic way "we're getting brainwashed", which is so often bemoaned by critical theorists.

The social repercussions of the use of idealised representations of women were also salient to participants. Beth expressed concern that women are evaluated according to how well they fit with idealised types, and while she claimed not to personally aspire to the typical advertising image of the beautiful woman, there remained for her a social pressure to conform. She also disagreed with the construction of beauty as physical.

In a related vein, Jane considered how men's expectations of women may be affected by constant exposure to representations of female perfection.

Summary
In this section I have argued that in mainstream Western culture the notions of *health* and *beauty* are not entirely distinct. Instead, the meanings that surround these two terms greatly overlap and converge. The body generally is the key site of meaningful intersection, and body weight in particular is central to popular constructions of both health and beauty. Consistent with this argument, participants regarded a slim body as a sign of fitness and good health. Eating is a key way in which body weight is regulated and therefore food takes on value both in terms of health and beauty.

Advertising perpetuates a thin ideal body for women not only through representations of women but by naturalising women's concern with body weight. The ads in this study treat dieting as a normal part of women's lives:

- In the Lean Cuisine ad, achieving a thin body is constructed as a site of competition and a way of measuring worth.
- The Healthy Choice ad constructs the consumption of fatty food as guilt evoking.
- The Yoplait Lite ad evokes positive connotations of consuming 'naughty' food but with a promise of guiltlessness.
- The Special K ad appears to challenge diet culture but does not lose sight of the imperative for women to "keep in shape".

In these ads the pursuit of health is used to mask the pursuit of beauty through the attainment of thinness. Thus Wolf's (1990) beauty myth survives in a veiled form in which it is very difficult to contest. The perfect self that is held up to women in the name of health is no less constraining and disempowering than more blatant images of idealised female beauty. As long as the attainment of a thin body is seen to be more about health than beauty, the value of a thin ideal is not subject to challenge and rejection. The treatment of a thin body as a health rather than a beauty concern necessarily has moral implications and it is to the moral aspects of food and health that I now turn.

Food, Health and Morality

Discourses relating to food and health respectively have strong moral underpinnings - this is not surprising, new or unusual. Writing more than 20 years ago, Crawford (1984) regarded the body as a cultural object, and health as a symbolic category through which bodily experience is structured. He argues that in Western culture, notions of well-being or quality of life are expressed through reference to health, and health thereby takes on considerable symbolic value. Particularly concerned with the moral meanings that underpin the achievement of health, Conrad (1994) concludes that "the pursuit of virtue and a moral life is fundamentally an aspect of the pursuit of wellness" (p.385). Focusing more specifically on food in relation to health, Lupton (1996) argues that food and eating are central to our sense of self, and therefore subject to moral meanings: "'good' food is often described as nourishing and 'good for you', but is also indicative of self-control and concern for one's health, while 'bad' food is bad for one's health and on a deeper level of meaning is a sign of moral weakness" (p.27).

Prior research and discussion clearly suggests a highly moral dimension to food and health related discourses. However, this conclusion must be tempered by the understanding that - consistent with the view that language is active and constructive (Potter & Wetherell, 1995) – there is a moral aspect to a great deal of communication, as we try to position ourselves as worthy social participants. The moral aspects of discourses about food and eating mainly involve the interrelated notions of health and beauty. In modern capitalist society, our social identities are greatly expressed through that which we consume, and eating is consumption par excellence. As suggested by the adage "you are what you eat", food can have enormous influence upon the definition of self, typically in moral terms. Due to the perceived social burden of poor health, moral positions in relation to health generally appear more politically explicit than those relating only to food, which remain more personal. In practice however, because food is seen as central to health, the moral issues surrounding food and health are closely interwoven and impossible to really separate. Moreover, food and eating practices are of greatest public interest where health is concerned. Paradoxically, while health is of public importance, responsibility for health is increasingly attributed at an individual level, and eating especially is viewed as a matter of personal choice. These three factors, (1) the centrality of food and eating to self identity; (2) the public importance of health; and (3) individual control over eating, combine to give a highly moral dimension to food and health discourses, particularly where they intersect.

Modern advertising has a clear moral function because it teaches us the value of things (consumer goods), in social terms. Advertising attempts to appeal to consumers as individuals with very specific needs and desires. The emphasis on choice in advertising places responsibility for health squarely on the shoulders of individuals (as consumers responsible for making healthy food choices). Thereby health is turned into an individual, rather than social, concern and consumption is proffered as the fix-all solution. A flow on effect is the increasing regulation and de-socialisation of eating practices. The naturalisation of this change can be seen in the Healthy Choice ad in which, instead of being a meaningful social occasion, dinner time is reduced to a matter of heating a pre-prepared frozen meal. The young woman in the advertisement is shown in isolation, and the only reference to the world outside her is through the

answering machine which records her mother's incessant phone calls. The mother is constructed as overly worrisome and anxious, whereas the father displays no similar neuroticism and is concerned only with ceasing his wife's unnecessary (and annoying) fretting. Participants briefly considered the role of the parents in the advertisement with Sharon commenting "they have the mum to bring in the whole meal, family meal thing". While participants understood the rationale behind the representation of the young woman in the Healthy Choice ad, they were critical of her busy lifestyle in which social relationships are displaced:

Jane: She's a busy girl
Sharon: She did have the 'sod you' everybody, not just, she had the 'sod you' face on her all the time
Keryn: Yep
Sharon: She did have that
Gina: And she was too busy to be um, looking after herself
Sharon: She's the kind of girl who'd never get a boyfriend lets face it, 'cos she looked like she was selfish as hell
Gina: (inaudible) no hair, no makeup
Jane: That's what I look like when I come back from work
Sharon: She'll be eating those bloody things for the rest of her life
Jane: She gets a bit stuck on her arse, sort that bit
Sharon: She'll be eating those things for the rest of her life
Gina: She's got no time for her car, she's got no time for herself, for food, for her mum, she's got no time for anything
Jane: But luckily, because of Healthy Choice she's still getting her vitamins, she's (inaudible), bunged it in the microwave
Gina: In what way is she getting her vitamins?
Jane: That's what it's saying isn't it, well they're saying she is
Sharon: By the time that girl had her food, and then had about four hours on her own sitting watching television, she could've actually made that meal
Jane: Yes, so could most of us
Sharon: So really, that woman really, she should be watching the telly as well in that advert
Jane: She should've, no she should've done that thing, ,jumped on the sofa, kicked the shoes off and got a fucking big bar of chocolate out (laughter) well that's the reality of it, I've eaten my Healthy Choice, now I can have a treat (laughter)
Sharon: Eat the vegetables, shut up and move on (laughter)
Jane: That's the reality of it

In this exchange, both Sharon and Gina were highly critical of the solitary, 'no time for anything' lifestyle depicted in the ad. The world represented in the ad is one in which the competing demands of work, self and family must be feverishly juggled. In this world the social imperative to look after oneself results in eating becoming de-contextualised – an act of function, not pleasure.

Moral discourses in relation to food and/or health are apparent in all advertisements viewed by participants in the singles group. For example, the So Good ad offers the product as a way of achieving virtue and redemption. In the ad, bright white light is used to connote goodness and purity in an almost religious sense. The light floods each scene in the same way that the white soy milk does. Where the product is depicted, the light seems to emanate from the carton (see Figure 18). In the closing

frame of the ad (Figure 19) the carton of So Good appears bathed in a halo of light – a final statement of its purity and goodness, and the salvation it offers. So Good is clearly constructed as healthy, and consuming it is the means to achieving a good life. The ad constructs living well as a direct outcome of eating well – a clearly moral proposition. To some degree, participants recognised, and were critical of, this focus of the So Good ad:

Beth: It's all just like aha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha
Jane: It's too, yeah I'm cynical of adverts, I think it's too aha, ha, ha, ha
Beth: Here's a lifestyle that you can have, if you buy the product
Jane: You can jump on a big Velcro thing if you want to
Beth: You can have the best time of your life!
Jane: Aha, ha, ha, ha, oh yeah, I think it's a bit...

In this brief exchange Beth and Jane articulated an awareness of the structure and motivation of advertising which associates products with lifestyles. Their mockery of the gleefully laughing women depicted in the advertisement reflects not so much a lack of identification with these characters, but a critical regard for what the ad *is* trying to achieve through these representations.

The moral meanings at work in the Yoplait Lite ad are quite different from those in the So Good ad. Participants were quick to note the distinctness of the Yoplait Lite ad:

Jane: They're completely opposite of what the other adverts have tried to achieve though aren't they
Keryn: So is naughty food somehow sexy or...
Jane: Oh yeah
Beth: Yeah, it's just like, you know, chocolate or something, yeah
Sharon: And also...
Jane: And, it's lite! Oh my god let's buy some tomorrow
Sharon: The problem is Jane, we'll probably buy every single one of these in the next week (laughs) (to Keryn) are you sure you're not under this advertising company?
Keryn: And trying to sell all this, I come into your home...
Sharon: It's a con, you know, very clever, it's a very good way to do it though
Keryn: It's very interesting because...
Jane: That appeals more to me 'cos it's slightly naughty
Gina: I like that ad
Sharon: They're trying to sell us the moment she's been very naughty

In the Yoplait Lite ad the product is constructed as a naughty treat. The value 'naughty' was very clear to participants, although it is quite subtly embodied in the ad and depends upon the signification of Frenchness, and the metaphoric and connotative value of the cats. For Sharon the paradigmatic relationship between the cats and the woman within the context of the ad with its connotations of French romance and sexiness, produced a strongly sexually themed reading:

Sharon: I think, you know, I'm sorry, but I think it's very dirty underlying
Beth: Yeah
Sharon: Very dirty (laughter) you know the whole pussy bit. I'm sorry, let's be honest
Jane: No

Gina: licking, pussy
Sharon: No I'm sorry, I think this has a whole...
Beth: Yes, it is
Sharon: If you really psychoanalyse this it's about spreading the yoghurt everywhere, underlying
Jane: (inaudible) night-time and the, yeah
Sharon: Exactly, but that's sort of, when we really read it...
Keryn: Especially with the French thing and...
Gina: I think Sharon's had too much wine and her thoughts...
Sharon: Oh, no, no, I really think that the cats, the pussies, the yoghurt, and the French, the everything, the ambience, I think that whoever was designing this had this in the back of, had that in mind

Consistent with her reading of the ad, Sharon further argued that the presence of more than one pot of yoghurt (as in Figure 31 and Figure 32) implies an absent male companion. She described the two pots of yoghurt in Figure 31 as "his and hers" and "sort of couply... the blokes can come round, have a yoghurt each". Albeit somewhat unique in the context of the focus group discussion, Sharon's reading of the Yoplait Lite ad is by no means aberrant, and the connotations of Frenchness activated in the ad combined with the female/feline metaphor are undoubtedly intended to give the ad a sexual undertone. Messaris (1997) considers the use of sexual metaphor to be common in food ads. While in ads for reduced-calorie products, the link between food and sex suggests that the product can help people lose weight and become more sexually attractive, there is typically a more metaphorical connection between food and sex in these ads, which generates an experiential equivalency between eating and sex (Messaris, 1997). In the Yoplait Lite ad, the sexualisation of the product is more consistent with this latter interpretation.

The sexual tone of the Yoplait Lite ad is quite subtle and not as explicit as the sexual allusions used in advertisements for products such as ice cream and chocolate. For example, in a current ice cream ad, a young woman writhes in delight as a ribbon of caramel sauce dives down her blouse and coils around her. Recognising the ideological implications of such representations, Kilbourne warns that "when food is sex, eating becomes a moral issue – and thinness becomes the equivalent of virginity. The "good girl" today is the thin girl, the one who keeps her appetite for food (and power, sex, and equality) under control" (p. 115, 1999).

The Yoplait Optimal advertisement is also about being naughty, however the meaning of naughtiness in this ad is less sexual and more directly moral than in the Yoplait Lite ad. Consuming the product is equated with performing a "good deed", and the immorality of stealing is used as a metaphor for the immorality of neglecting one's health (in the ad, a busy life of crime is literally the reason why the cat burglar character doesn't always look after herself). Participants' understanding of the Optimal ad was consistent with this interpretation:

Keryn: What's the story with this ad?
Beth: Oh, I think she's just incredibly busy and she's also really naughty so she does one good thing
Jane: Yeah but she tells us all that doesn't she
Sharon: I don't think it was as naughty at all, the other cat bit, the cat burglar bit

Beth: No I think she...
Sharon: I mean obviously she's done the whole swipe at the end of the ad but it wasn't quite like the last advert
Beth: But she's a mum, and she's like, ultra busy and just, yeah
Keryn: It's not so sexy, it's much...
Jane: She tells us
Sharon: It's dangerous as well isn't it
Jane: And she tells us the whole advert what everyone is wanting to tell us, I'm on the go, I'm busy, she actually physically speaks, talks, as opposed to just us assuming that she's on the go

Participants readily understood the metaphorical meaning of thievery as "naughty", and how this links to the redeeming value of the product. For example, Jane said of the burglar-woman "she's independent, she loves going out stealing" and "she's been very naughty". Similarly, Sharon described the burglar-woman's lifestyle as "dangerous", and Gina also commented that "stealing is dangerous". Whereas Yoplait Lite promises the experience of naughty indulgence, Yoplait Optimal is constructed as good in opposition to such naughtiness. In this respect the Optimal ad is similar to the So Good ad, in which the message is that consuming the product is not only good for your health, it also makes you a good person.

Importantly, the burglar-woman's life of crime also means that she is busy, and does not have time to look after herself. While she is a cat-burglar by night, she is simultaneously constructed as a caring mother and wife – perhaps analogous to many women who juggle work and home commitments. At one point in the ad, the woman stoops to pick up a toy duck left lying on the floor and says "in my line of work I'm constantly on the run", in reference to both stealing and looking after her family. Participants readily picked up on references to the woman's identity as a mother and attempted to reconcile this with the naughtiness and danger implicit in her cat-burglar identity.

Sharon: No, I don't, I think it's, very odd, it's not one of the best ads, it's basically saying that she's a bit dangerous, but a family person, she's everything
Beth: Yeah, she's got it all, and as somebody said here, it's the one good deed of the day, great
Jane: What's with the fact she's got a husband and she's got a child?
Beth: Well it's her one good deed to herself isn't it

Participants likened the Optimal ad to other ads (Healthy Choice and Lean Cuisine) in which the convenience of the product is a major selling point and women are shown going through their busy working days. For example, Beth said of the Optimal ad "I think it's exactly the same as the first one [Healthy Choice], it's saying she doesn't look after herself, apart from this one thing that she can do, that's very easy". The Healthy Choice ad also echoes the Yoplait Optimal ad in how it constructs eating as a moral issue. Compare "in my line of work I'm constantly on the run, which means I don't always look after myself" from the Optimal ad, with "at least you can take care of yourself without feeling guilty" from the Healthy Choice ad. Although the message is framed slightly differently in the two ads – in terms of guilt or goodness – the underlying discourse is fundamentally the same, the elements of which are (1) women have a social and moral obligation to 'take care of' or 'look after' themselves; (2) by eating

'healthy' (and typically low fat) foods; (3) in order to avoid guilt and maintain a construction of the self as 'good'. In both ads, at the same time as eating is constructed as guilt-evoking or naughty, the product is offered as the guilt-free solution.

Concluding Comments

Each of the ads discussed in this section draws upon the moral meanings surrounding food and health to construct the advertised product as good. Following is a list of thematic paradigms which appear throughout and across ads. This list is structured so that aligned terms are grouped together on either side of the list.

good	-	bad
healthy	-	unhealthy
control	-	release
virtuous	-	naughty / sinful
permitted	-	forbidden
responsible	-	irresponsible
individual	-	social
low-fat	-	fatty
natural	-	processed
bland / unpalatable	-	flavoursome / tasty
redemption	-	guilt
punishment	-	reward
desire	-	fulfilment
hunger	-	satiety
production	-	consumption
self-restraint	-	indulgence
deprivation	-	excess
thin	-	fat
beautiful	-	ugly

These terms are semantic oppositions relating to food and health which are embedded in the ad texts. Of course such a list could never be exhaustive, however it does provide a neat summary of the meanings at work in the ads and their relationships to one another. Chandler notes that "while there are no opposites in 'nature', the binary oppositions which we employ in our cultural practices help to generate order out of the dynamic complexity of experience... it is not in isolation that the rhetorical power of such oppositions resides but in their articulation in relation to other oppositions" (2002, p. 101). It is the meaningful relationship between the terms within each column that is most important to understanding the ideologies that surround food and health. For example, the alignment of health with goodness, virtue, redemption and beauty, reveals how morally loaded are the intersecting discourses of health and food and the ideologies that underpin them.

These oppositions are not simply theoretical but are actually played out in the themes of the ads, for example, the Yoplait Optimal ad is about guilt and redemption, good and bad, virtue and sin. The Lean Cuisine ad is about desire and fulfilment. Often, the product is constructed as a means to resolve the tension between oppositions. For example, low fat foods offer a solution to the capitalist imperative to consume and the conflicting moral imperative for self-control (so you *can* have your cake and eat it too – as long as it's low fat). Products such as Lean Cuisine, promise that low-fat, 'healthy'

food can taste good – "it's not just lean, it's cuisine". The Yoplait Lite ad offers fat-free, guilt-free indulgence – the consumer can be naughty without really being naughty. Rather than breaking down the relationships between aligned values, this temporary re-alignment serves to reinforce the bonds between aligned terms. Otherwise the ad would not make sense and the product would lose its appeal. So the good taste of Lean Cuisine (implied by *cuisine*) has value because of the usual alignment of *low-fat* and *healthy* with poor flavour. The naughtiness and indulgence of consuming Yoplait Lite has value because of the usual alignment of these terms with high calorie (fatty and sugary) foods such as chocolate and ice cream.

These semantic oppositions help us to understand the ambivalence that women feel towards food. Women are encouraged to use eating as a reward, comfort, and even a sex substitute, leading Kilbourne (1999) to argue that food advertising which targets women "normalizes an obsession with food that takes precedence over human connection" (p. 113). At the same time, women are reminded to control their eating in the name of keeping in shape, or looking after themselves, both of which are basically synonyms for being and staying thin.

Part Two: Mothers

The discussion is presented in three parts. Mirroring the singles section, I begin with an overview of the ads viewed by participants, focusing on the health appeals used within each ad. At this stage the focus is mainly on denotative and connotative meanings. The ideological impact of the individual ad representations is then explored as the ads are considered collectively in the sections that follow, under the headings of 'Constructing Health' and 'Responsibility for Health'. The second section, on constructing health, expands upon the overview to contemplate the ideological consequences of privileging particular accounts of health. In the third and final section, the attribution of responsibility for health is considered, with reference to both the ad texts and the focus group discussion, again with a focus on ideological implications.

Overview

Nutella

While the Nutella ad is short (15 seconds), it is complex and dense with meaning. The health related content of the Nutella ad is multi-faceted, and the product is simultaneously constructed as energy-giving, nutritionally rich and naturally 'good'.

In the opening scene (Figure 40) we see a tired school boy; his head drops to his desk as he struggles to concentrate in the class room. Nutella is introduced as the energy giving solution and soon the boy appears alert and attentive (Figure 41). As the accompanying female voice over explains "Kids need energy to get through their day. Nutella is a food with a low glycemic index, for slow release energy, helping kids stay alert longer".

Figure 40

Figure 41

Connoting scientific rigour and impartiality, a graph is used to both reinforce the spoken message and to increase the credibility of this claim (Figure 42).

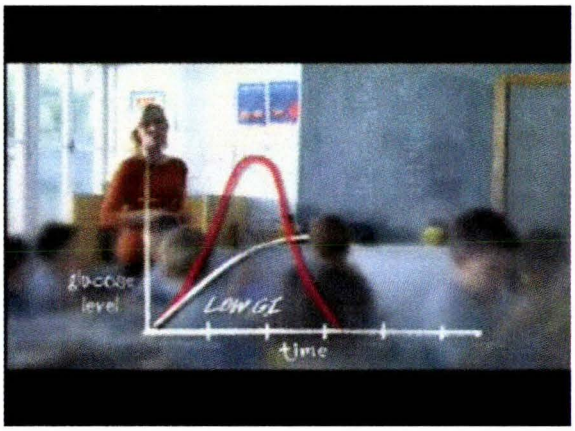

Figure 42

The advertisement also works to construct Nutella as natural (and therefore healthy). Nature is connoted through the representation of unprocessed, raw ingredients. So packed with real hazelnuts is a single jar of Nutella that nuts literally pour from the jar (Figure 43 and Figure 44). In the next shot (Figure 45) flowing milk gurgles and froths in all its natural splendour. The intended message is made clear with the accompanying voiceover: "with over a hundred hazelnuts and the goodness of skim milk, Nutella gives kids plenty of energy to live and learn". The captions 'protein' and 'calcium' additionally reinforce the health value of the natural ingredients that constitute the highly processed final product that is Nutella. Notably, the two main ingredients of Nutella, sugar and oil, are not mentioned.

Figure 43

Figure 44

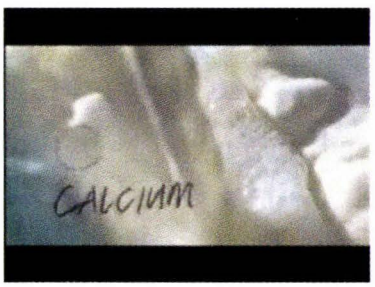

Figure 45

Participants' discussion did not focus on the Nutella ad. Instead, conversation was structured around participants' existing understandings of the product as well as how they purchased and used the product. Participants also spoke more generally about what they understood glycemic index to mean. Angela and Kelly referred to an older Nutella ad, which claimed that Nutella has less fat than peanut butter:

Sue: They advertise the main ingredient as hazelnuts too, whereas, I haven't looked at the ingredients list but it's probably way down
Kelly: No, it's quite high
Sue: It is?
Kelly: It's quite high in it the hazelnuts
Sue: Oh, OK
Alicia: Not so good for all the nut allergics
Kelly: Do hazelnuts have oil in them, or just peanuts?
Sue: Yeah, I'd say they do

Angela: It's actually, it's actually much less fat content than peanut butter, because that used to be one of their claims
Kelly: It did that's what they first came out with...
Angela: Yeah
Kelly: ... how it was so much less fat than peanut butter 'cos it's not oily like peanut butter can be, at all
Keryn: So overall what do you think of the claims that were made?
Sue: Total crap (laughter)
Alicia: I think it's just a load of crap I mean I won't go out and buy that for that reason
Angela: I think the thing that convinced me, my friend actually bought it in a small glass, (to her son, Isaac) Isaac shhh, and that's why we use it, and the kids actually like it but I only give it to them every so often
Kate: As a treat
Angela: Yeah
Kate: Like a chocolate bar or something
Angela: I think, the only thing that I s'pose swayed me a bit was the lower than peanut butter
Kate: But I don't give my kids peanut butter
Kelly: But how many kids who want a chocolate bar are going to take Nutella on bread?
Angela: Well he's actually not that fussed by it, Lily was the one that was fussed by it
Kelly: I think it's really bland when I've tasted it, my mother in law likes it, it's lower in fat than peanut butter
Angela: Mmmm
Alicia: But it doesn't say anything because peanut butter is that high in fat so it's not really saying anything
Sue: That's right
Alicia: I mean if it was lower in fat than something on the healthy side

This extract also reminds us that participants' understandings of ads are varied, and do not correspond directly with the advertising message. Moreover, it is particularly difficult to make sense of claims made in television ads, due to the frequency and speed with which such claims are made. This is also clear in the extract below in which Kelly and Kate briefly argue over what specific claim was made in the Nutella ad.

Kelly: But they're also claiming that it helps them learn
Angela: That'd be because of the GI
Kate: Not learn, it helps them concentrate
Kelly: No, they say it helps them live and learn
Angela: Learn, yeah
Kelly: So they're claiming it helps them to learn
Angela: It's a pretty wide claim, a little bit of Nutella spread on their sandwiches
Kelly: To boost the brain
Angela: To cheat you put it on some nice fluffy white bread for them
Kelly: Yeah nice thick, big thick scraping
Angela: With butter or something as well
Sue: Kids need energy to get through the day...
Kelly: Yeah right
Sue: ...you don't see many lethargic children (laughter)
Sue: They don't come to our playgroup (laughter)
Kate: They don't live in our house (laughter)
Alicia: We would like them to grow a bit lethargic

Kelly: Just occasionally (laughter dies down)
Alicia: An apple a day will do
Angela: 'cos they spread it on white bread on the ad
Kelly: Yeah
Angela: And if you're talking about eating low GI food you have to eat multi-grain bread... and so that would just completely discount the GI
Sue: Unless you've got the, twice the fibre bread (laughter)

To summarise, three main assumptions underpin the health related constructions in the Nutella ad. Firstly, the ad addresses parents as concerned with, and therefore responsible for, the health of children and what they eat. Secondly, the health value of the product is framed through the concepts and language of nutritional science, using terms such as 'glycemic index' and 'protein'. Finally, the ad constructs natural foods, such as milk and hazelnuts, as healthy and 'good'. Many of the same assumptions are foundational to the other ads and these will be considered collectively in the sections on constructing health and responsibility for health.

LCMs

Thirty seconds long, the LCMs ad humourously shows up the difference between the interests of parents and children – not just in terms of food choice. The ad is structured through the voiceover which performs a narrative function. The voiceover is spoken by a young girl and addresses parents:

"You care about our school photos, but we don't. You care about our manners, but we don't. And you care that Kellogg's LCMs are made with wholesome grains of rice, a touch of honey, and no preservatives or artificial colours, but we don't, we only care that they're delicious. Kellogg's LCMs, good for you, yummy for us".

Participants readily related to the representation of "what kids are like" in the LCMs ad and appreciated the use of humour:

Keryn: Someone was saying before about LCMs, was it you Angela, that you thought the ad was quite funny?
Angela: The Nutri-Grain
Keryn: The Nutri-Grain one, wasn't someone talking about the LCMs
Kelly: That was...
Alicia: I was saying that I like them because I relate to them, that's what kids are like, I mean I can tell mine that this is a really healthy bar and you gotta eat that, but they'll still eat what they like, I mean, I can have a cupboard full of really healthy food but if they're not gonna eat it, well the dogs will be very healthy, that's all I can say, I mean I'm not that good myself
Angela: Do you say it's healthy to them?
Alicia: Nah
Angela: 'cos I don't do that, I try not to say
Alicia: We've got the rule they can eat as much fruit as they want, that's the only thing they don't have to ask to take anything, they can take fruit whenever they want
Angela: Yep
Alicia: But you've gotta have your treats like, you know, a couple of biscuits, a couple of lollies, you don't just grab the box of Freddo frogs, drag it up under your bed and get into it, yeah I think it's a good ad

Kelly: Well it appeals to kids
Alicia: That's why I'll try those bars, worth a try, they might like it
Angela: Mmmm, yeah well
Alicia: And if they're healthy on top of it...
Angela: Yeah...
Alicia: ... that's good
Angela: ...well, but I, I mean Rice Bubbles really aren't that bad, in terms of like as a cereal, in terms of there's not really any sugar, added sugar or um, and they're not high in fat or anything, so, I s'pose that probably gets me a bit, that's why I think oh, they mightn't be too bad, and honey I suppose you think oh, honey's all right
Kelly: Well it's a more natural sugar so it's, it's not as bad

The supposed naturalness of LCMs is the main health related selling feature and underpins the construction of the product as healthy or "good for you". The ad tells us that "Kellogg's LCMs are made with wholesome grains of rice, a touch of honey, and no preservatives or artificial colours". It on this basis that the goodness of the product is asserted and the ad closes with the slogan "good for you, yummy for us" (Figure 46).

Figure 46

This construction of LCMs was reflected in participants' understandings of the product with Angela contemplating the nutritional value of rice bubbles and Kelly describing honey as "a more natural sugar". It takes little insight to recognise the constructed nature of the product description in the LCMs ad. This is made even more apparent if we consider what alternatives might have been used. For example, 'wholesome grains of rice', might instead be 'puffed white rice' or just 'rice'. Although these alternative descriptions may be more accurate, they make the product sound less appealing, natural and healthy.

Having constructed LCMs as "good for you", the ad exploits the responsibility that parents feel for ensuring children have a healthy diet, and the difficulty that parents have actually getting children to eat healthy food. In the extract above Alicia expressed this conflict saying "you can tell mine... you gotta eat that, but they'll still eat what they like". LCMs were seen by Alicia as a solution to this dilemma because "they might like it... and if they're healthy on top of it... that's good". The ad reassures parents that LCMs are not thought of as healthy by children but rather as a delicious treat, and something that children would choose to eat.

Food becomes a site of conflict between parents and children as it is a key area in which parental control is enforced. Fundamentally, a product that is constructed as something that both parents and children will choose to eat is valuable in that it removes the tension surrounding food choice for children. The issue of conflict around what children eat is developed further in the section on responsibility for health.

Weetbix

The Weetbix ad is 30 seconds long. The well-known Weetbix jingle "hey where's my Weetbix, I need them every day, hope you've had your Weetbix, for breakfast every day" plays in the background throughout the ad. In the ad the product is promoted by popular Australian cricketer, Brett Lee. Lee speaks throughout the ad:

"Did you know that some cereals, also promoted by sports people, have ten times more sugar than Weetbix, and too much sugar is something I certainly don't need. Whole wheat, energy, fibre and iron, that's what's important for a winning performance, and that's why Weetbix is an Aussie champion. As for high sugar cereals, well there are some things that are just that much sweeter."

Using the language of nutritional science, the health value of Weetbix is framed in terms of "what's important for a winning performance", suggesting the kind of explosive power that Weetbix provides (see Figure 47). In this sequence, Brett Lee is represented in an almost god-like way. He is shown wearing a white test uniform as a lightening bolt extends from his arm to the stumps at the other end of the pitch which explode into flames as they are struck.

Figure 47

The various representations of Brett Lee in the Weetbix ad generate diverse connotations. Above all, Brett Lee appeals to the sporting nationalism that is a core part of Australian identity. The ad tells the viewer that like Brett Lee, "Weetbix is an Aussie champion". Lee's status as a champion sportsman is made clear throughout the ad which features actual footage of him bowling and celebrating as he takes a wicket (see Figure 48). With the Australian flag draped around his neck, Lee triumphantly raises a huge silver cup - the symbol of sporting victory - high above his head (Figure 49). In the accompanying narrative he says "there are some things that are just that much sweeter".

Figure 48

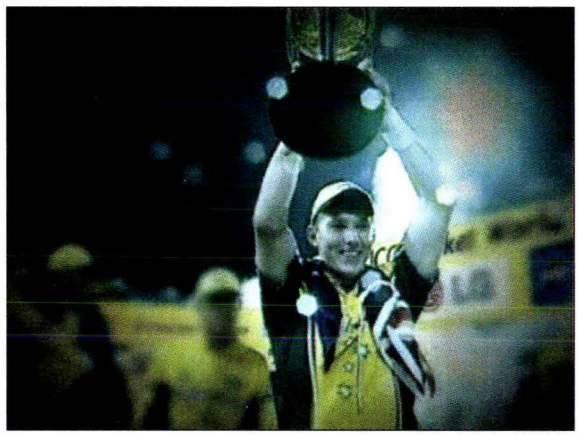

Figure 49

These images are not just about winning, but the national pride that sporting victory evokes in a culture where success in sport is highly valued and is central to national identity. The advertising message is not only that Weetbix gives you the essential nutrients to physically perform, but that Weetbix is as much a part of Australian culture and identity as is sport. Weetbix is well known as Australia's top selling breakfast cereal[6] and participants' responses to the Weetbix ad emphasised this:

Alicia: I never buy it, I find it so boring, like it's dry and, I mean I'm pleased, I didn't grow up with Weetbix that's probably why, I'm not an Australian but my husband would always buy it

Kate: I don't even think they need to advertise anyway because we'll always buy it, we buy Weetbix anyway

Angela: Yeah well I think yeah the sugar bit gets aimed at mothers, then they flash up Sanitarium and you automatically think of Sanitarium as being healthy products...

Sue: That's right

Angela: ...good price

Sue: It is a healthy product

Angela: It is a healthy product, it's the best

Alicia: It is, but it's just so bland

The Australian-ness of Weetbix is reinforced in this extract in which Alicia, who grew up in Holland, relates her dislike of Weetbix to her nationality saying "I never buy it... I didn't grow up with Weetbix... I'm not an Australian". Whereas Kate, who identifies as Australian, says "I don't even think they need to advertise... we buy Weetbix anyway".

The Weetbix ad constructs the product as natural in contrast to 'high sugar' cereals. While saying "some cereals... have ten times more sugar than Weetbix", Brett Lee discards refined white sugar from a café style pouring jar (see Figure 50), with a disapproving look on his face. As the sugar drains from the jar, the colour drains out of the picture and the camera zooms in on the sugar. The message is that colourless, refined sugar is dull, lifeless and unnatural.

[6] According to the Australian Consumers' Association (2005), in 2004 Weetbix had a 17.5% market share amongst breakfast cereals. The next highest selling cereal was Kellogg's Nutri-Grain with a 7.9% market share.

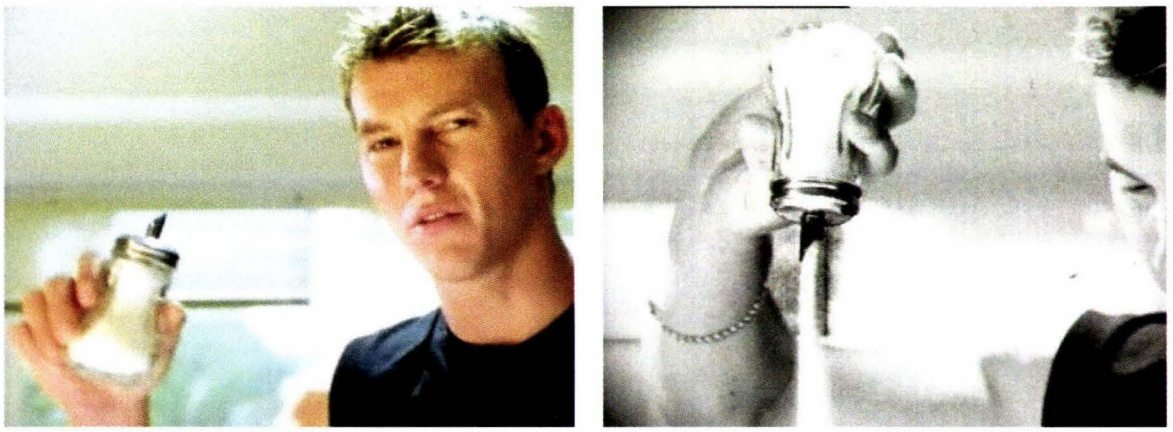

Figure 50

This contrasts dramatically with the way in which Weetbix is represented in the ad. Creamy milk splashes about as slices of banana tumble into a bowl of Weetbix (Figure 51). Rays of sunlight give a golden glow to the image. The recording is slowed down and each rivulet of milk can be seen as it splashes gracefully - here is nature in all its spectacular beauty.

Figure 51

The Weetbix ad constructs the product in diverse ways. Specific health claims are made about Weetbix – that it is high in fibre and iron and low in sugar – which are supplemented by the representation of Weetbix as gloriously natural. Moreover, these attributes give the consumer the explosive energy that is essential to a "winning performance". Finally, Weetbix is constructed as an Australian icon - as much a part of Australian culture as winning in sport. Brett Lee's endorsement of the product gives credibility to all aspects of the advertising message inasmuch as he embodies all that Weetbix is constructed to be.

Nutri-Grain

The relationship between mother and son forms the narrative basis of the Nutri-Grain ad, in which a humourous analogy is made between caring for an infant and raising a teenager. The 30 second long ad comprises four scenes which each represent a different humourous aspect of the caring relationship between mother and son. In a parallel structure, the punch-line of each scene is presented as a visual caption. In the opening scene (Figure 52), the mother climbs wearily from her bed to take her son to football training. The caption reads "they still get you up early". In the next scene

(Figure 53), the mother stops her son in the hallway to tidy his school shirt. The caption reads "they still need tucking in". In the third scene (Figure 54), the mother says a cheerful 'good-morning' to her son as he seats himself for breakfast. His response is a simple grunt and the caption reads "they still communicate without words". As the son devours a bowl of Nutri-Grain the caption appears "and they still need regular feeds" (Figure 55). Throughout the ad, the Supremes' song, Baby Love, plays in the background, reinforcing the humour of the commercial and leading the viewer to the overall message which is delivered in the final shot of mother and son (Figure 56) with the caption "no matter how big he grows he'll still be your baby boy".

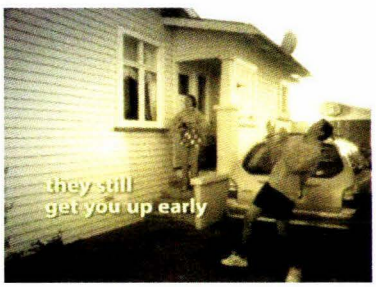

Figure 52

Figure 53

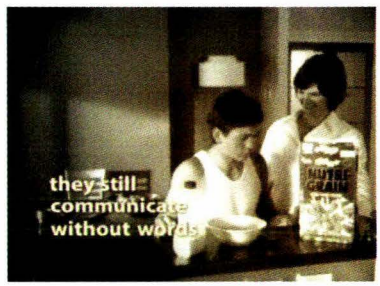

Figure 54

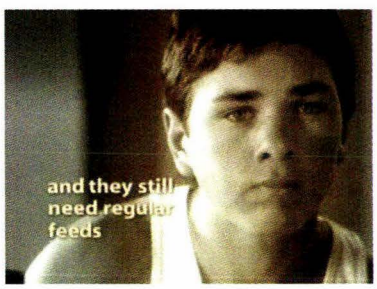

Figure 55

Figure 56

The advertisement is filmed in sepia tones with a soft focus. This effect connotes feelings of nostalgia, and historically was used to signal a flashback or remembered sequence in film. Having become somewhat clichéd, this technique is now used infrequently, and hence the effect is humourous in the Nutri-Grain ad.

The Nutri-Grain ad explicitly constructs mothers as responsible for the health of their children. The viewer is encouraged to identify with the mother figure who is the central character of the ad. The mother is constructed as responsible for all aspects of her son's wellbeing, and dietary health is but one facet of this. While expert testimony is used to add weight to the health claims made in the ad, care is taken not to usurp the mother's position of authority within the home. This is done in a 'tongue-in-cheek' fashion as the mother is re-established as the authority figure when she knocks the high performance coach off screen with the refrigerator door before turning to give her son a 'sweet as pie' smile (Figure 57).

Figure 57

The health value of the product is promoted midway through the ad when high performance coach, Keiran Barry, appears in the kitchen (Figure 58) to claim that "They've got carbos for fuel, calcium for bone strength and protein for muscle development. Everything growing bodies need is in Kellogg's Nutri-Grain".

Figure 58

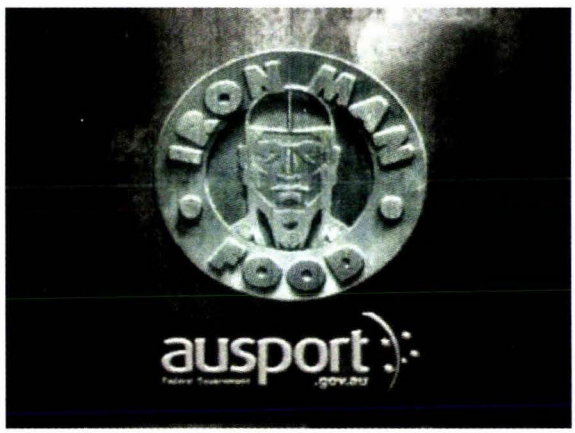

Figure 59

The ausport monogram apparent on the coach's shirt (Figure 58) and at the end of the ad (Figure 59), further legitimates the health value of the Nutri-Grain, by associating the product with sport and with a recognised Government sporting agency[7]. Additionally, the "iron man food" slogan from the closing shot of the ad (Figure 59) has long been used in Nutri-Grain advertising, and Nutri-Grain sponsors the iron man series in Australia.

Notably, the Nutri-Grain ad also reveals a gendered construction of diet. The product is represented as a food for (growing) boys - this is quite explicit in how the son is shown eating Nutri-Grain (in a disinterested way – different from how women and girls are represented eating), and in the slogan "iron *man* food". Nutri-Grain is constructed as a high energy fuel that promotes muscle development. This construction suggests that boys have greater dietary needs than girls due to their greater muscle mass and physical activity.

[7] Ausport refers to the Australian Sports Commission.

The Nutri-Grain ad is similar to the Weetbix ad in that both ads draw upon the health connotations of sporting activity, make use of 'expert' testimony, and are heavily grounded in nutritional science concepts. However, in the Weetbix ad, Brett Lee is more than just an 'expert' and much of the meaning to be transferred to the product comes from the connotative value of Lee as an Australian sporting hero. The Nutri-Grain ad is revisited in the section on responsibility for health.

Wonder White

The Wonder White ad is short (only 15 seconds) and simple. The ad is constructed entirely to push the health related sales message that Wonder White is fibre enriched, and therefore better than other white breads which are generally regarded as having low fibre content. This message is communicated visually in the opening and closing scenes (Figure 60 and Figure 61), and audibly through the dialogue of the boys (one of whom, upon seeing a billboard advertising Wonder White, exclaims "Wonder White, twice the fibre of regular white bread, that'll make it twice as easy to find"), the background music ("wonder White, twice the fibre"), and the closing voiceover ("Wonder White, twice the fibre of regular white bread").

Figure 60

Figure 61

The ad is structured through a simple, humourous narrative as the boys search in vain, using a telescope and 'walkie talkie' radios, to find the hidden fibre. This narrative achieves two things: a rapport is established with parents who relate to the representation of children as naive; and, ignoring the fact that fibre is no more visible in 'brown' wholegrain or wholemeal bread than it is in white bread, the ad reassures parents that kids won't know the difference, and therefore the product will be acceptable to them.

As with the LCMs ad, by offering a product that is acceptable to both parents and children, the ad removes the tension surrounding food choice for children. The product also has value in promising the removal of guilt that results from allowing children to eat unhealthy food. This is neatly expressed in the following comment from Alicia:

Alicia: I don't think that's targeted to kids at all 'cos kids couldn't care what's in white bread as long as it's white, as the mum, it's like feeling guilty that they will only eat white bread but at least it's got twice the fibre

Angela: Well, yeah you think well it's just as good as wholemeal bread 'cos it's got the fibre, so that's what the, you know

Kate: We buy Wonder White but only because the slices are bigger
Angela: Actually and I've been sucked in, when we were talking about vitamins, the only one I've been sucked in to is the omega 3s
Keryn: OK, that's a big one at the moment
Kelly: It is
Angela: And I have, and I have bought butter that's got omega 3s in it and I have actually bought the Wonder White, Wonder White's also got omega 3 and I have actually bought that
Kelly: But they're running it now, they're advertising it now with extra calcium in it as well in Wonder White
Angela: Yes, yes because Bec bought that for Sammy when he stopped drinking bottles, because apparently one slice or something is equal to a serve of calcium
Kelly: Really?
Angela: Yeah so she figured well if he's eating three slices of bread he's getting
Kelly: Three servings of calcium
Angela: Yeah because he just blank refused to drink bottles, so
Kelly: That's a lot
Angela: Yeah, yeah, so that's the only one that I've sort of been sucked in to
~
Angela: Well he was refusing to drink milk and he wasn't eating yoghurt or anything when he had all those ear infections and he ate white bread so you knew he was getting his calcium
Sue: That's what I was saying if Rachel did suddenly refuse to eat Weetbix then I might look for something like that
Keryn: So how do you feel about enriched food, do you genuinely think it's a great thing because you can, for example, get calcium into your kids in other ways?
Sue: If you're having a problem

This extract also shows how products such as Wonder White are used by mothers as a practical, and not just emotional (i.e. guilt driven), solution to balancing issues of choice and nutrition in relation to what children eat. That said, emotional and practical aspects cannot really be separated, as the imperative to provide children with healthy food is grounded in both what a good mother should do and what is necessary according to nutritional science discourses, so that both emotional and practical aspects drive one another. These ideas are explored further in the section on responsibility for health.

Summary

Unlike the ads targeted at single women, the ads targeted at mothers concentrate mainly on the health value of the product, so that the main appeal of the ads is couched in health terms. Across all ads viewed by participants in the mothers group, nutritional science explanations of health dominate. Diverse aspects of dietary health are referenced, although there is some overlap between ads, for example, protein, calcium and fibre are all mentioned in more than one ad. Various notions of energy are also consistently raised: Nutri-Grain contains "carbos for fuel" and Weetbix is "whole in energy", while "Nutella gives kids plenty of energy to live and learn". In apparent opposition to biomedical explanations of dietary health, in the Nutella, LCMs and Weetbix ads the product was constructed as 'good' through representations of 'naturalness'. The next section focuses on the ideological implications of privileging nutritional science explanations of health, and the value of the 'natural' is also considered in this context.

At this stage we can also start to see how ads position mothers as naturally concerned with the health of children, engendering feelings of guilt and anxiety when children eat 'unhealthy' food. Issues emerging from this relate to the difficulty that mothers have balancing good nutrition with children's food preferences. These issues are made more complex due to the conflicting meanings that surround particular foods. For example, in response to Alicia's account of having difficulty getting her children to eat healthy food, Angela asked "do you say it's healthy to them", thereby alluding to the negative connotations surrounding healthy food. Conversely, 'naughty' foods were seen as having positive value as "treats". These issues are taken up and expanded in the section on responsibility for health.

Constructing Health

In modern Western culture, due to the prevailing scientific world-view, biomedicine is seen as offering the best basis for understanding health. From the perspective of one who is socialised in this culture, it is tempting to regard nutritional science explanations of the link between food and health as more rational or real than alternatives. Additionally, it is difficult to see how such a view is actually a cultural privileging of a particular discourse. Other cultures may not regard food as centrally important to health, or they may have very different notions of how diet and health are linked. For example, Beardsworth and Keil (1997) describe the importance of hot-cold food categories to Malay culture. Importantly, hot and cold do not refer to the temperature of the food but a less definable property (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997). "Food classified as hot may be taken to alleviate 'chilling', but consuming hot foods to excess may result in... rashes, fevers and constipation [which] can be relieved by the consumption of foods classified as cold" (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, p. 127).

Compared to Western culture, more holistic notions of well-being characterise traditional cultures in which spiritual and health beliefs are highly integrated (Ikeda, 2004). Well-being is conceptualised in terms of balance in mind, body and spirit; it is an imbalance of forces that causes illness and treatment is focused upon re-harmonising these forces (Ikeda, 2004). Ikeda (2004) argues that in modern Western culture, biomedical explanations of health are overemphasised, despite clear social and emotional influences upon food choice, and the demonstrated effects of non-biological factors related to spiritual, psychological and social well-being upon health. Given this, we are compelled to consider the implications of prevailing biomedical explanations of health in Western culture.

The dominance of biomedical explanations of health is consistent with the ideology of healthism which holds individuals responsible for health by offering lifestyle and behavioural explanations for the achievement of health and well-being (Crawford, 1980). Duff (2004) argues that by focusing on individual choice, public health policy, which is couched in biomedical terms, overlooks structural influences that constrain or direct food choice. In particular, he draws attention to the power of the food industry to shape individual food choices. In Duff's view, food producers and marketers benefit from an emphasis on nutritional education as food supply issues are omitted from public health debate. In the ideological context of healthism, food becomes a source of anxiety as individuals try to construct themselves as healthy in relation to food choice (Chamberlain, 2002), and as Lupton (1996) suggests, the result is a highly moralistic

and self-regulated construction of diet. Healthism also impinges upon the meaning of food and eating practices as the boundaries between food and medicine are increasingly blurred – a process known as 'medicalisation' (Chamberlain, 2002). Yakult, as a product, is exemplary of the medicalisation of food. The treatment of food as medicine further reinforces the relationship between food and health and contributes to the anxiety engendered by food - particularly for women, who are the target consumers of products such as Yakult.

While the ideology of healthism deems individuals responsible for health, knowledge about health is increasingly the domain of experts. Beardsworth and Keil (1997) observe that "Modern scientific formulations of... the links between diet and health... have become the intellectual property of specialized and highly trained professionals... the rationalization of diet has seen professional groups, and the state itself, progressively claim ever more authority over nutritional knowledge and over dietary choices" (p. 149). Reflecting the privileged position of expert health knowledge, several of the ads in this study use expert testimony to support health related claims and thereby achieve credibility. For example, in the Nutri-Grain ad, high performance coach, Keiran Barry, provides a brief lesson on the nutritional properties of the product; his tutorial even includes a classroom style diagram, drawn on the refrigerator door (see Figure 62).

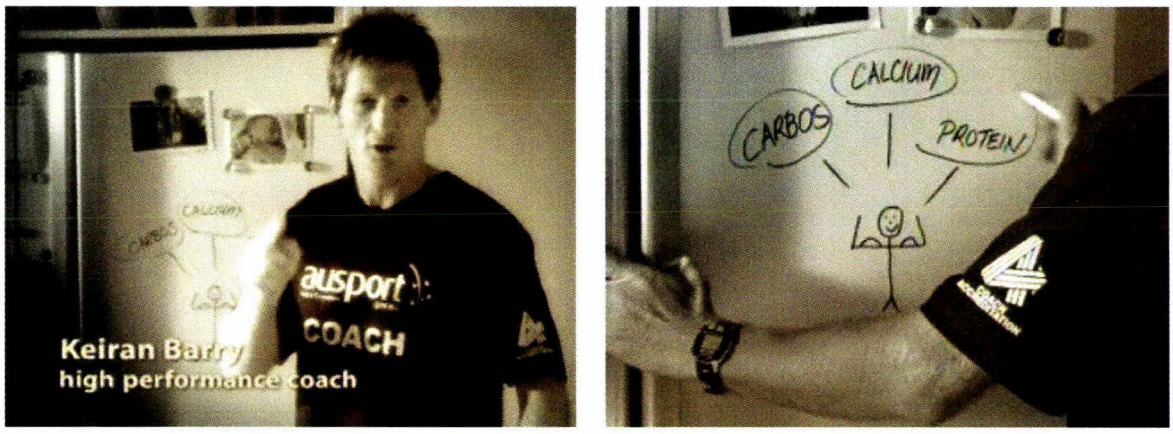

Figure 62

In the Weetbix commercial, Brett Lee fills the role of expert, and the nutritional value of the product is framed in terms of "what's important for a winning performance" (see Figure 47). In the Yakult advertisement, the figure of microbiologist Doctor Conway, the embodiment of scientific objectivity and truth, is employed as the advice giving expert.

The focus group discussion indicated that the use of expert testimony does work to legitimate health related claims. For example, when discussing the Nutri-Grain advertisement, participants explicitly acknowledged that the association of the product with elite sportspeople, and the iron man competition in particular (which Nutri-Grain sponsors in Australia), was influential in their assessment of the product as healthy:

Angela: I think everyone's been fooled by Nutri-Grain for a long time...
Kelly: Yeah
Angela: ...I think it's only just recently that it's...

Alicia: You think of iron man
Sue: Because of the (inaudible) advertising it you do associate it with sport
Alicia: Like if you wanna be a healthy surfy running up and down the beach...it's Nutri-Grain
Kate: That's the funny thing like if you eat Nutri-Grain...
Angela: That's right
Kate: ...you'll have a body like this', it's like yeah sure (Alicia laughs)
Angela: And I think I only saw it, Sunrise did it, and I think it was um, Melissa was saying 'oh, but I feed my two year old it all the time I didn't realise it was loaded with sugar because why do the iron men, are always the one who are promoting it?'
Kelly: But the thing is if you think about it like that iron men probably need all the sugar...
Kate: Yeah that's right
Kelly: ... and they burn it all off, kids...
Kate: And then they burn it all off so they're not...
Sue: So they're not going to eat their lunch like they should
Alicia: How many kids run ten kilometres...
Sue: But my sister in law she's overweight, and is no, not an iron man, and she eats Nutri-Grain for breakfast (Kelly laughs), I had to look twice at her when (inaudible)
Alicia: (with sarcasm) But it's healthy
Sue: She doesn't exercise at all
Alicia: No, but she might turn iron woman if she keeps eating it
Sue: Yeah, that's probably what she thinks
Angela: I think it's, I think it's fooled everybody for a long time because of that
Kelly: But she's genuinely thinking it's healthy because sports people eat it?
Sue: She would just buy it because of the taste
Kelly: So she wouldn't associate it with health?
Sue: Maybe
Kelly: But that's what I'd be thinking, you think because sports people eat such healthy diets so if they're going to eat Nutri-Grain it's obviously got a healthy aspect to it somewhere

At the same time, this extract clearly demonstrates participants' awareness of how advertising uses association to transfer meaning. After viewing the Nutri-Grain ad, participants immediately remarked on the use of the coach figure. Angela regarded the coach with cynicism asking, "what the hell is a high performance coach?" Sue also noted the significance of the coach, commenting "that coach just represents outside influence, I think it's quite funny how the mother just comes along and pushes him out of the way". Participants responded similarly to the use of Doctor Conway in the Yakult advertisement. Participants in both groups found the representation of a doctor/scientist blatant and excessive. Only Sharon, from the singles group, argued that the use of the scientist figure in the context of the advertisement served a heuristic function:

"It's over the top but you don't, as you say, we watch adverts in between our next television programme, and we're not really worrying that (inaudible) we're just sort of going, oh, look at them with white coats, but, at the back of our head it's made us believe, which they're trying to do, because we're not really concentrating, 'hey it must be healthy because there are doctors'"

In this extract, Sharon made a link between the representation of Doctor Conway and the attribution of value (as healthy) to the advertised product ("it must be healthy because there are doctors"). In this way, the advertisement refers to science in order

to construct Yakult as healthy. The relationship between science and health is not established within the ad, rather it is taken as pre-existing and natural. As such, while participants 'saw through' the representation of a scientist, they did not challenge the biomedical explanation of health offered in the ad. Instead, this formed the basis of their understanding of the product. Similarly, with the Weetbix and Nutri-Grain ads the relationship between sport and health is assumed and the health value of sport is transferred to the advertised products.

The use of expert advice in advertising constructs mothers as in need of education. By privileging expert advice, biomedical discourse positions women readers as inexpert – women are thereby made reliant on expert others to direct their health promoting efforts (Madden & Chamberlain, 2004). "Women readers are... positioned as uneducated consumers, with limited understanding of 'proper' dietary practices and in need of more 'scientific' education... the subjectivity associated with this position is one of disempowerment... women are warranted few (if any) speaking rights with regard to nutritional and dietary practices" (Madden & Chamberlain, 2004, p. 592). Nonetheless, the responsibility that women carry for health requires them to constantly seek expert guidance on health matters. In this study, participants' regard for external advice was clear in how they attempted to keep abreast of the latest nutritional recommendations.

Angela: Yeah, I think that GI has become the latest big thing
Sue: It was in Play News this week
Angela: It was, yeah
Sue: About nutritionalists, they've written a book on it
Angela: And the people that've, they're Australians that've done most of the research and they've won all these awards
Kate: It's to help you lose weight?
Angela: Well it can help you lost weight because, because if you eat foods with low GI then it keeps you fuller for longer so you shouldn't be eating as much, and also for people with diabetes controlling their insulin levels, and now they've released books on low GI for kids, and they've actually released a book on sugar saying sugar's actually not as bad as we've all been told it is
Sue: Well at least it's natural
Angela: Yeah, and um, and also controlling things like um, um, cists on your ovaries if you've got problems with that, they're saying that this low GI foods can help with that, and heart disease, like it's...
Kate: Wow
Kelly: It's big
-
Alicia: The skim milk, but I think skim I think, well it used to be that kids up to the age of at least five should have full cream
Kate: Yeah
Angela: No that's changed, it's two
Kelly: But then it depends on the size of your child now as well doesn't it?
Angela: Nah it's two, because they've discovered children as young as five have got um, have already got fats in their arteries and they're already developing high cholesterol and...
Kelly: Really?
Angela: Yep, so the recommendation now is two

Participants frequently made reference to generalised notions of expertise using words like "they" and "should", as in "they've discovered" and "you should". In the extract above, Angela specifically identified "the government" as the expert authority on dietary health. The ownership of nutritional knowledge by experts, coupled with the nature of this knowledge as "always provisional, subject to controversy, challenge, refutation and replacement" stimulates food related anxiety (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, p. 159). This is particularly so for mothers who are held responsible for ensuring the dietary health of the family. It is not surprising then, that participants expressed anxiety over food, to the extent that Angela described herself as "very wary" and "very paranoid".

Keryn: What's your concern with genetically modified foods?

Angela: Well, I just, I mean I s'pose I don't like when they start fiddling and I'm very wary, as I said like I only eat organic meat because I'm very wary about, and I don't believe the chicken industry when they say 'we don't give them any', 'cos I know a lot of people that work in the chicken industry and I've been told what they do to their chickens, so I

> paranoid about fish and mercury levels in fish, if you wanna hear anything about mercury levels in fish ask her, but um, all our family now eats organic, I mean occasionally, I must admit occasionally I will have just what's available because it is a bit more money, but I know the taste and I often can't eat a lot of it, you can just taste the difference, and I still, I won't say I'm like a nut and I'm compulsory about it, like if I go to someone else's I'm not fussed but I do, I am sort of careful

In this extract participants expressed specific concern with "Frankenstein foods" which were regarded as "fiddling with nature". The interests of producers, to increase sales and profits through increased production, were seen as at odds with the interests of consumers. In this context of anxiety, nature is seen as antithetical to 'cultural' modification of food and as such comes to signify goodness and health. Both in the talk of participants and in the ads, 'natural' was constructed as inherently good. Participants in the singles group discussion also made an explicit distinction between natural and unnatural when discussing the Healthy Choice ad:

Gina: I've only ever had one or two, but I prefer natural products, natural vegetables, nothing in a packet, I don't buy anything in a packet, I'd rather grill my chicken or whatever
Jane: No but that's very healthy that is
Gina: I'd rather have cheese on toast or sardines on toast than one of those
Jane: You don't believe that they're a healthy choice
Gina: No I don't, no
Keryn: Why is that, what is it that...
Gina: I don't know if they've been refrigerated or how long, I don't know
Keryn: Okay
Gina: So I just think what products do they put in there to make them stay like that, it's all, I never buy refrigerated, you know those vegetables, those stir-fry vegetables...
Sharon: I agree with you completely, the Lean Cuisines that I buy are the rice and chicken dishes, I know it's nothing to do with that, but I'm getting to the point of...
Keryn: On no, that's alright
Sharon: ...to go with the vegetables, I never buy the frozen type vegetables, in a packet, the packet vegetables, 'cos what I actually do is buy the Lean, the chicken and the rice, and add fresh vegetables
Gina: Oh, okay

Gina's distinction invokes broad cultural notions about the value of the 'natural' versus the 'cultural'. The distinction made by Gina was reinforced by other participants with Jane saying "that's very healthy that is" and Sharon saying "I agree with you completely". Sharon even went on to legitimate her own purchasing habits in light of Gina's objection to frozen vegetables.

The natural/unnatural dichotomy was not only apparent in the talk of participants about food, but in the marketing of food products. In the Weetbix commercial, this dichotomy is used to distinguish Weetbix from 'high sugar' cereals. As described earlier, in the ad sugar is represented as dull, colourless and unnatural, whereas Weetbix is represented as gloriously natural. In the LCMs advertisement, the supposed naturalness of the product is the main selling point and it is on this basis that the goodness of the product is asserted. In the Nutella ad, nature is connoted through the representation of raw ingredients – namely, hazelnuts pouring from a jar (Figure 44) and flowing milk (Figure 45). At this point, it is helpful to distinguish between 'nature' and 'the natural'. Fiske

(1987) puts it simply: "the natural' is the sense that a culture makes of nature: the natural is a cultural product, nature is pre-cultural reality" (p. 121). This distinction is helpful in highlighting the symbolic character of 'the natural', which means that appeals to nature made in advertising are always artificial. Moreover, there is no true sense in which mass produced, refined, packaged foods can be considered natural.

The binary opposition between nature and culture has been discussed by several theorists in different but overlapping ways. Levi-Strauss (1969) talks of the *raw* and the *cooked*. For him, cooking is the hallmark of human agency and includes all social and cultural processes by which raw things are transformed by people. Similarly, Farr (1995), describes the rural/urban contrast which he first saw in the work of Herzlich from 1969. Research participants' "dissatisfaction with life in the metropolis shaped their representations of health and illness... 'natural', for them, meant nature and nature meant the countryside" (p.5). Farr sees the rural/urban contrast as corresponding to the contrast between health and illness and he talks about the use of the rural/urban, natural/unnatural dichotomy in the marketing of modern health food products such as organic foods. Farr is very much concerned with collective social representations and feels that people's representations of health and illness are exploited through such marketing as "we react to the representations rather than to the reality they represent" (p. 7).

Judith Williamson (1978) also comments on the appropriation of the natural in print advertising, which in her view works to obscure the human role in production. Consistent with Farr's argument that rural/urban and natural/unnatural are aligned terms, Williamson (1978) notes that the value of the natural increases as society's distance from nature increases. In semiotic terms, the connotative value of natural as good, comes from the negative connotations of that which is considered artificial or synthetic. Inasmuch as science drives the development of food processing technologies, the value of the natural can be seen as a response to the anxiety engendered by the changeability and incomprehensibility of scientific knowledge about health. Moreover, because food plays an important role in the definition of self and is seen as essential to good health, its capacity to engender anxiety is further magnified.

Summary

In modern Western culture, biomedical explanations of health prevail, despite their inability to give a holistic account of health. Nutritional science uses biomedical explanations to articulate a clear link between diet and health. Health appeals in food advertising are largely couched in nutritional science terms. Consistent with the ideology of healthism, nutritional science holds individuals responsible for health by emphasising informed and rational food choice. While individuals are deemed responsible for health, knowledge about health is increasingly the domain of experts, as reflected in the use of expert testimony in food advertising to support health related claims. The use of expert advice in advertising constructs mothers as inexpert and in need of education. Despite this position of disempowerment, mothers are required to keep abreast of nutritional recommendations and must constantly seek expert guidance on health matters. The ownership of nutritional knowledge by experts, coupled with the changeable nature of this knowledge stimulates food related anxiety, particularly for mothers who are held responsible for the dietary health of the family.

'Natural' foods offer a simple and stable solution to the complexity and changeability of scientific wisdom about the relationship between diet and health. Theoretical discussions of the binary opposition between nature and culture all emphasise the importance of the scientific and technological advancement of society to the valuation of nature. This is perhaps because the concerns of science are not always seen as ethical and in the best interests of consumers. Nature comes to signify goodness and purity in contrast to the negative connotative value ascribed to that which is artificial or synthetic.

Thus food is a site of considerable anxiety and ambivalence for mothers who are simultaneously disempowered and burdened by nutritional science discourses A key assertion of the arguments presented thus far is that mothers are held responsible for the health of the family, and children in particular. I will now look to both advertising representations and the talk of mothers to see how this is so.

Responsibility for Health

A major premise of this study is that ads, as social and cultural texts, function ideologically to circulate particular meanings which serve the interests of some groups of people over others. In the last section I looked at how health representations in food ads privilege nutritional science explanations of health which disempower and disadvantage mothers. Building upon this discussion, in this section I will argue that while healthism creates health as the responsibility of individuals, the obligation to ensure health is disproportionately that of women. This section is structured as a discussion of how advertisements position mothers as responsible for the health of children. Along the way the ideological implications of this are considered, using focus group extracts to situate the discussion.

Implicit in advertising which uses health-related appeals, is an attribution of responsibility for health. This attribution is often represented through the characters in advertisements and their relationships to one another. It is also apparent in how the viewer is addressed by the advertisement. The location or position of an ad, in terms of the time of day that the ad appears and other programmes and commercials that are broadcast at that time, provides further information about the target consumer. Of the ads included in this study, the Nutri-Grain ad most explicitly constructs mothers as responsible for the health of their children. The ad invites identification with the mother figure in the ad through its mode of address. Beginning "they still get you up early" the ad directly addresses the mother as viewer. 'You' refers both to the mother represented in the ad, and to the external viewer of the ad. The absence of an identifiable 'I' who makes the address, creates the illusion that the dialogue is between the mother and the viewer (Cook, 1992). This address is carried through to the ad's conclusion "no matter how big he grows, he'll still be your baby boy". Moreover, while an expert is used to talk about the nutritional value of Nutri-Grain, the position of the mother as ultimately responsible for her son's wellbeing, and dietary health in particular, is retained as she literally pushes the 'expert' aside.

The LCMs commercial also assumes the responsibility of parents for the health of children, and a major aspect of this involves providing a healthy diet. This is not done through the depiction of a parent/child relationship as in the Nutri-Grain ad, but in how the ad positions the viewer. The engagement of the viewer depends not on

identification with the character(s) in the ad but with the absent viewer that is addressed by the ad. The LCMs advertisement is targeted at parents of school age children and the ad attempts to speak on behalf of the children whose parents are addressed. The narrative voiceover is spoken by a young girl and uses the direct address of 'you': "You care about... but we don't". Williamson (1978) refers to the assumed but absent reader of an ad as the 'subject'. She regards the creation of the subject in advertising as essential to the process of generating meaning. Williamson argues that the transference of meaning within an ad depends upon the action of the reader. In performing this exchange the subject is signified by the product so that the product gives meaning back to the subject. Thus the LCMs advertisement creates the subject as parentally caring and naturally concerned with nutritional health, and this identity becomes the exchange value of the product. To the extent that viewers adopt this identity, they will respond to the advertising address. Unlike the Nutri-Grain ad, the LCMs ad does not address mothers in particular. However a more recent ad for LCMs, which was not included in this study, shows a mother unpacking her children's lunch-boxes at the end of the day to find nothing has been eaten, except for the LCMs bar as evidenced by an empty wrapper. It may be argued that the caring and concerned subject is implicitly female, however such a contention is circular when arguing that mothers are positioned by advertising as responsible for the health of children.

The female voiceover of the Nutella ad also suggests a female subject who is positioned similarly to the viewer of the LCMs ad - as caring for all aspects of children's well-being, including educational achievement. Madden and Chamberlain (2004) describe a similar construction of the viewer as "a moral guardian" in a print ad for Coco Pops:

> "the authoritative nature of this text covertly constructs the mother as ineffectual if she does not ensure that her children's nutritional requirements are met. She is rendered as a 'bad' mother if she prevents her children from gaining a solid basis for academic achievement and thus success in life" (p. 592).

With such constructions, mothers are reminded of, and made responsible for, the long term consequences of failing to provide children with adequate nutrition. Like the Coco Pops ad described by Madden and Chamberlain, the Nutella ad implies that because good nutrition is essential to scholastic achievement, which is in turn fundamental to future success, the mother who fails to provide her children with a healthy diet is effectively ruining their future. Similar implications are apparent in the Weetbix ad in which the product is constructed as "what's essential for a winning performance". Consistent with this subject positioning, participants expressed worry and guilt over the dietary health of their children. Promoting the health of children through diet was a constant concern and children's eating habits were seen as having considerable consequences:

Kelly: But I think you question more once you have kids...
Angela: Yeah, you do
Kelly: ...like people our own age who don't have kids wouldn't question any where near as much
Angela: No, no
Kelly: Because you have to live with the consequences of what you feed your kids, and they don't have to live with those consequences

Angela: And I think also, well I don't know, for me it's one of the biggest things, what am I feeding them, am I feeding them the right diet, it's a never ending...
Kelly: And you're always the guilt in the back of your head, giving them the wrong stuff

Like the LCMs and Nutella commercials, the Wonder White ad does not appear to be directed specifically at mothers. In fact, the ad does not directly address the audience at all. While the ad depicts children only, the content of the ad is aligned with parental concerns about dietary health and fibre in particular, as Alicia noted: "I don't think that's targeted to kids at all 'cos kids couldn't care what's in white bread as long as it's white, as the mum, it's like feeling guilty that they will only eat white bread but at least it's got twice the fibre". Moreover, the Wonder White ad was recorded at 1:45pm on a weekday afternoon, when children, such as those depicted in the ad, are at school. Other products and services advertised in the same commercial break included McDonalds, Michel's (patisserie), Ponds (skincare products), Johnson's pH 5.5 (skincare products) and Jenny Craig (weight loss products and services). Collectively, these advertisements exhibit a strong bias towards representing and addressing women. In particular, both the Ponds and Johnson's ads depicted mother/daughter relationships. From the positioning of the Wonder White commercial within this ad break, it is clear that mothers are the target consumers for this product. This seems particularly likely given that the ad was broadcast in the early afternoon when a large segment of the audience would be mothers who work within the home[8] . A more recent ad for Wonder White features the character of 'Wonder mum'.

Conversely, the Weetbix ad was seen by participants as, in some ways at least, appealing to fathers:

Alicia: I think that's aimed more to men that ad
Keryn: It's aimed at men you think?
Angela: I think, I think it's also aimed at mothers with the sugar bit...
Alicia: I never buy it, I find it so boring, like it's dry and, I mean I'm pleased, I didn't grow up with Weetbix that's probably why, I'm not an Australian but my husband would always buy it
Kate: I don't even think they need to advertise anyway because we'll always buy it, we buy Weetbix anyway
Angela: Yeah well I think yeah the sugar bit gets aimed at mothers, then they flash up Sanitarium and you automatically think of Sanitarium as being healthy products...
Sue: That's right
Angela: ...good price
Sue: It is a healthy product
Angela: It is a healthy product, it's the best
Alicia: It is, but it's just so bland, I think that's why... (Kelly returns to the room after taking a phone call)
Keryn: What do you think of the use of Brett Lee to sponsor the product?
Sue: It's kind of irrelevant to me (general murmurs of agreement)
Angela: It's irrelevant to me as well
Kelly: Weetbix, are you talking about the Weetbix one?

[8] Based on figures published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics: In 2003, 56% of females in the labour force were employed and 72% of males. Of total females employed 45.7% were employed part-time compared to 14.8% of men.

Sue: I think it's mostly the men who will pick up on that

~

Sue: It's probably aimed more at pre-pubescent boys, rather than...

Keryn: So you think it could be aimed directly at the kids eating it rather than just the parents?

Kelly: Well maybe it's more aimed at fathers, the fathers, perhaps the few fathers that...

Participants described the representation of Brett Lee as irrelevant to them, with Sue commenting "I think it's mostly the men who will pick up on that". Interestingly, Angela felt that the reference in the ad to the sugar content of Weetbix *is* aimed at mothers. Angela distinguished between two different sets of appeals used within the ad - one on the basis of identification with sporting heroes such as Brett Lee, and the other on the basis of health. Only the sporting appeal was perceived as directed at men, while the health appeals were seen as addressing the concerns of mothers. Angela's comments were very much an expression of the understanding that mothers are naturally concerned about health (more so than fathers) in relation to what their children eat. The dual focus of the Weetbix ad is also apparent in how the ad is constructed. The shots that comprise the ad can be divided into three groups. The frames in Figure 47 are staged and employ the use of significant visual effects such as the lightening bolt and superimposed words *Energy, Fibre* and *Iron.* The images in Figure 48 and Figure 49 are edited from actual footage of a one day match. The colourful 'one day' uniform differentiates this footage from both the staged lightening bolt scene, in which Lee wears a white test uniform, and the 'direct to camera' testimony which is washed in white. Finally, Lee's direct-to-camera testimony is given in a kitchen setting, quite different from the other scenes in which he is shown playing cricket. The different scenes can be seen as appealing to the different target audiences of the ad – the white washed kitchen scene appeals to mothers; the lightening bolt scene appears to children; while the real footage appeals to fathers. In this sense, the Weetbix ad has something for everyone and hence the mothers felt that it appealed both to themselves and their children and husbands, albeit in different ways. Importantly, the message contained in each set of images is different. The white, kitchen scene emphasises the natural, health aspects of the product; the actual footage is about winning; and the lightening bolt scene is more magical, highlighting those aspects of the product related to the promise of superhuman skill and strength.

The collection of ads included in this study may not really demonstrate the extent to which advertisements construct mothers as responsible for the health of their children. Ads which have aired since for products such as Coco Pops, Rice Bubbles, OTs and Milo all make clear appeals to health, and feature mother figures while fathers are absent. Of course, this targeting of mothers reflects reality for many families in which the mother is mainly responsible for caring for children and managing the home. In the focus group discussion, when asked who is most responsible for looking after the health of the family, participants responded by considering who does the grocery shopping. It is difficult to say whether a focus on purchasing naturally resulted from a discussion about advertising, or whether this reflects a genuine reduction of 'looking after health' to purchasing food. Overall, the mothers felt that they were most responsible for grocery shopping. Angela even regarded her husband as getting in the way of providing a healthy diet for her son:

"see mines a shopper, I have to watch him 'cos he'll give him (gestures to her son) stuff, very easily and very regularly and I have to watch him like he'll give him Pepsi and stuff and I have to watch him so he's, and buy him chocolates a lot at the shop".

Participants' view that they are more responsible for health related tasks such as grocery shopping, is consistent with research findings that while men's contribution to housework is increasing, women still carry the burden of domestic work, including cooking and grocery shopping (Sullivan, 2000)[9]. Even when both partners are employed full-time, women do three times as much house work as men (Sullivan, 2000). Devault (1997) suggests that while some men share responsibility for domestic tasks such as cooking, these activities are largely directed and planned by their wives, so that women are responsible for the management of domestic tasks even when they are performed by men. Moreover, men and women approach these tasks differently, reflecting the way in which they are differently positioned in relation to domestic work. In Devault's study, while women privileged their husbands' and children's preferences when deciding what to cook, men were not so constrained when cooking and rarely considered others' tastes, instead emphasising their own creativity and inventiveness. Devault (1997) concludes that men "do not feel the force of the morally charged ideal of deferential service" (p. 188), with which women's caring work is constructed. These differences in how men and women are positioned in relation to the caring work of feeding the family were apparent in the talk of participants:

Kate: If I go shopping, most of the stuff I put in the trolley is for the kids
Alicia: Yeah
Kelly: Mine is, you always...
Angela: Or the dogs
Alicia: Yeah, we'll have boring dinners again
Kelly: I don't think about what I want to eat during the week, it's what I want to feed the kids, what's easy and quick
Alicia: We've started having good dinners on Saturdays, we take turns cooking something out of Jamie Oliver's whatever cookbook, and the other one's got to cook it, you gotta pick three courses and the other one cooks it
Sue: That's a good idea
Angela: We do that on our anniversary and um,
Alicia: It was good, we started it, we've done it three times, (mock boasting) it sounds really good doesn't it
Kelly: We invite Nick and Keryn round and Dave cooks (laughs)
Keryn: Is that the only time he cooks, when he wants people to come round?
Kelly: No he cooks a lot but if we have people round Dave always cooks and he spends all day looking through the recipe books and deciding what three courses he going to make
Alicia: Oh wow
Keryn: He does a great job
Kelly: Yes he's very good
Angela: Yeah when they've got a recipe book they can actually cook
Kelly: Dave never follows recipes very well
Angela: 'cos if I give Jamie a recipe book he can cook some wonderful meals

[9] Data in this study came from time-use diaries recorded in 1975, 1987 and 1997. Sample sizes for each cohort were 690, 392 and 202 couples respectively.

Kelly: Dave, 'cos he says 'well I haven't got that so I'll just, create' and he'll go 'oooh, I'll put this and that'
Keryn: 'I don't actually know what that is'
Kate: Then they create these brilliant meals, and then they can't recreate it again
Kelly: 'So what did you put in it?'
Kate: All the time
Kelly: 'Oh, I just threw things in'

In this extract, participants spoke of prioritising the needs and wants of children when grocery shopping, as in Kelly's comment "I don't think about what I want to eat during the week, it's what I want to feed the kids". By contrast, men did not prepare "boring dinners" for the family, but "good dinners" for guests or special occasions, and participants described their husbands as good cooks, able to creatively concoct "brilliant" meals. Although it was not explicitly stated, what seemed to define these meals as special was the exclusion of children. Clearly, for men and women cooking does not have the same meaning, and it is women who are responsible for the day-to-day preparation of family meals.

The role of female as carer and provider of food is also grounded in early patterns of socialisation that differ between girls and boys. From her observation of the mealtime interaction of four Australian families, Grieshaber (1997) documents how girls are discursively positioned from a young age as responsible for preparing, serving and cleaning after meals. By contrast, boys are positioned as the recipients of meals, expected only to sit at the table and wait to be served. In all families, mothers were responsible for preparing family meals, regardless of whether they worked outside the home. The four mothers in the study shopped for food, prepared, served and cleared it away afterwards; and while girls were required to help with these tasks, boys were not. Grieshaber also remarked that "all children were at times offered some choice by their mothers concerning what they wanted to eat at mealtimes. However, the way in which girls were positioned to respond to such choice was different from the boys... the girls made decisions quite quickly and without much fuss. In comparison, the boys utilised these opportunities to position their mothers as objects of their male power" (p. 659).

The responsibility of women for feeding and nourishing children begins with pregnancy and continues into infancy (Lupton, 1996). The pregnant woman must carefully monitor her diet in order to maximise the health of her baby (Lupton, 1996). Moreover, once the child is born the value of breast feeding as the best (i.e. most natural and healthy) way of providing nourishment means that "the task of assuaging the infant's hunger is that of the mother alone" (Lupton, 1996, p. 43). As the child grows, responsibility for their health and diet remains largely with the mother. From the outset, ensuring the health of children through good nutrition raises issues of moral responsibility for mothers. As Murphy (2004) argues, feeding children produces especially strong moral judgements because "the potential consequences arising from 'risky' infant-feeding 'choices' are borne not by the mother, but by the baby to whom the mother owes a duty of care" (p. 203). In Murphy's (2004) study, mothers who did not breast feed their babies were strongly compelled to justify their decision in order to preserve their identify as good mothers. Importantly, Murphy (2004) notes that:

"The force of expert advice about infant feeding lies not in compelling women to conform, but in the way in which it sets the moral context within which women negotiate their identities as

mothers. It would be a mistake to assume, just because women do not always follow expert recommendations, that such recommendations have no impact. Their power lies not in their ability to make women do what they would otherwise not have done, but in their authority to define the standards by which mothers' feeding activities are to be judged, by others and indeed by the women themselves" (p. 208).

As the arguments of Lupton, Grieshaber and Murphy suggest, the positioning of mothers as responsible for the health and diet of children is not merely an unfair construction of advertising. For most mothers, including the participants in this study, this construction reflects their lived experience as providers of food for the family. Moreover, this identity is fundamental to mothers' positioning of themselves as good and moral. The following extract gives some insight into the complexity of the issues which mothers must negotiate in order to take up such a position.

Alicia: We were talking about that like as a kid like I was denied sweets...
Angela: So was I
Alicia: ...and not allowed to have chips...
Kelly: Oh same and you pig out
Alicia: ...but once I grew up I was, you get that hungry for it that you go totally overboard
Angela: And never had takeaways so as soon as I got a job I lived on KFC
Kelly: Yeah
Alicia: I think it's better if they can have some kind of maybe...
Keryn: Moderation
Alicia: ...you can't trust them at this age but some kind of relaxed relationship to food...
Angela: Yeah, let them have a little bit
Alicia: ...you can have maybe two lollies a day or whatever, a couple of biscuits
Kelly: But I think, you can, I've...
Alicia: As long as you eat your dinner
Kelly: ...I've always let my kids have, have marshmallows and chocolate and like that, I don't, they don't have it every day
Angela: It's nothing sacred because I think it's when you make it sacred, because my...
Kelly: But they stop, they know when to stop
Angela: Yeah, and it's not a, like they're not fussed by it, sometimes you can offer Isaac and he goes 'no I don't want that'
Kelly: And you take them to a party and they don't come home throwing up because they've pigged out on sugar all afternoon, because they eat what they want and then they ignore the rest of it
Angela: Well when my mum's around he asks her 'no that's naughty, you can't have that' and you say 'no, you don't say that to him, it's not, naughty'
Kelly: Because then they want more and they won't...
Angela: Yeah, yeah, well I know that's what I did, so, hence (gestures at her own body)

In this extract, participants ascribed importance to an aspect of food and health that has little to do with the nutritional value of food. They described healthy eating in terms of balance and moderation where occasional indulgence in fatty and sugary foods was seen to promote long term health more than exclusion of such foods. Participants spoke of their own eating issues in an emotional way. For example, Alicia talked of having a 'relationship' to food, while Angela explicitly challenged the construction of particular foods as 'naughty' and 'sacred'. Participants drew upon their own experience to collectively argue that denying children 'unhealthy' food leads them to develop a

detrimental emotional relationship with food characterised by unbalanced food choice and overindulgence in unhealthy foods. This argument allowed participants to move from a position of guilt for giving their children 'bad' food to a guilt-free position whereby their actions were seen as beneficial to the long term health of their children. In making this argument, participants reinforced the responsibility of mothers generally for the dietary habits of children, to the extent that they held their own mothers responsible for their own adult food preferences and eating habits. This is clearest in Angela's story in which she held her mother responsible for what she regarded as her unhealthy emotional relationship with food which she saw as having led to excessive consumption of fast food and subsequent weight gain.

The differences that participants described in their attitudes to children's diets, versus their mothers', are also consistent with broader changes in how children are positioned socially. Coveney (2004) argues that in the second half of the twentieth century, a new social view of childhood emerged that treated children as citizens with rights, responsibilities and autonomy. Comparing pre-war child-rearing guide books with more modern texts, Coveney (2004) explores how these changed attitudes are manifest discursively. He remarks that in the older books "advice for parents on feeding children focused almost exclusively on food rules and regimes" (Coveney, 2004, p. 225) with very little guidance on the social management of mealtimes. By comparison, modern expertise emphasises children's ability to choose and reason (Coveney, 2004). The management of conflict over eating is explicitly addressed in modern texts on feeding children, and the right of children to choose what and how much to eat is privileged (Coveney, 2004). Consistent with Coveney's observations, participants described managing children's diets as a constant source of conflict. Comments such as "you just can't have a battle over every little thing" and "food is such a battle" were typical:

Sue: You just can't have a battle over every little thing..
Kelly: Nah, and they've gotta learn...
Sue: ... or you'll be screaming all day
Kelly: And I mean it's their, it's a way of teaching them that there is choice out there and they've gotta choose and they can't have everything, see I can bribe my kids now with mangoes and OK, it's not the cheapest thing around, but...
Alicia: But it's good
Kelly: ... but they'll eat it and they're quite happy to eat mangoes, and they'll ask for mangoes...
Angela: And food is such a battle
Kelly: Oh it is, yeah, and it gets so boring
~
Kelly: Kirsten wanders around the house going 'healthy, healthy, healthy'
Angela: Oh really
Kelly 'Healthy'
Angela: And then, it is such a battle because I think they know what they want and I think they have, um at this, I think at sorta this age they have very boring tastes and sometimes you think all, all you've eaten like all I've given you is pasta with cheese sauce for the last five days, and you sort of think, I need to give him something else, I think also you put a lot of pressure on yourself because there's so many books you know, saying 'are you feeding your child right? Are you giving them this?' and like I look at what he should be eating and he's eating nowhere near what he should be eating

In this extract, participants clearly expressed the centrality of choice to conflict over food, as Kelly said "it's a way of teaching them that there is choice out there and they've gotta choose and they can't have everything". Disciplining children's eating is more than the assertion of parental dominance – it is part of a broader process of socialisation. As Lupton (1996) observes, "rules around food within the family context mark the boundary between acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour. Parents' attempts to shape their children's food consumption habits... may also be regarded in the wider context of the acculturation of the young into the adult world" (p. 52). Beardsworth and Keil (1997) describe the use by parents of various strategies to encourage children to eat a suitable diet. "Strategies may include the offer of rewards if the child consumes what the parents regard as desirable foods and the threat or application of punishments if such foods are persistently refused" (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, p. 55). In the present study, all participants talked about their rules or strategies of nutritional socialisation intended to afford children choice while still maintaining some degree of control:

Kate: We have lollies once a week now, except on holidays (inaudible) but we have one day a week when we go to the service station and they pick two lollies each

Kelly: Well I just limit mine...

Alicia: (to Kate) you've gotta be happy with that

Kelly: ... well if we go shopping in the weekend they'll ask for ice-cream or hot chips and they'll ask for a ride and they'll ask for a drink and I say 'you can pick one of those', and then they have to learn by it, and, I mean, quite often it'll be they'll pick the two dollar ride that lasts for two minutes, over lollies or juice or

Angela: Well if you, if you give him a choice over a Matchbox car and a box of Smarties he'll pick the car every time

Kelly: Yeah, that's right

Angela: I'll guarantee it, and I'll often give him that choice

Alicia: Later on will he complain when he doesn't get the Smarties?

Angela: Nah, he doesn't, 'cos you say you've got the car and he's happy with that

Kelly: Yep, and, and they, mine don't complain either, like I'll do that in the supermarket they can have a chocolate frog or a Yowie egg or whatever or they can pick a toy, and they'll quite often pick the toy, that's less usually in price than the, the Yowie egg or the whatever else, and they don't care 'cos they've got it, you know, forever

Sue: Until they break it

Kelly: Yeah, and they've chosen it

Angela: We do that too, we have a day like on Saturdays he usually gets chips or a donut, or McDonalds or something and that's sort of his treat day and if he asks for another 'Ah, no we'll wait till the weekend when daddy's around and then you can'

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Alicia: What they liked yesterday they don't like today but they might like it again tomorrow, it's all, I find that day care has got a lot to do with it 'cos they get a hot meal down there in the day, at lunchtime...

Kelly: I always like when...

Alicia: ...and 'my best friend she doesn't like it, I'm not gonna eat that again' and that was at the age of three and we were like 'but you liked peas yesterday' but 'Sharon doesn't like peas'

Kelly: Yeah I like the days that Brayden goes to childcare and has a hot lunch because then he'll come back and say 'I ate these green things I think they're called beans' 'oh good, we'll have those for tea' 'no I don't think we'll eat them at home' (laughs)

Sue: I was reading somewhere that you should, it's our job to provide access to good nutritional food and it's up to them to decide how much they eat and what they eat, so since I've accepted that, now I'm a lot more relaxed

Kelly: My kids eat...

Kate: (laughing) I don't offer them vegetables

Angela: No neither do I, I just give, I just put corn in front of him and that's it

Kate: Apparently it should be, that is you should always put it on their plate and if they choose not to eat it then they don't have to

Kelly: But they also say it's what they see you eating that they eventually turn around and eat when they're ready, but it's like, I didn't eat vegetables until I was eighteen (laughs)

Kate: Well my kids get served what we eat

Sue: (to Kelly) But you eat them now

Kelly: I eat heaps of vegetables now but until I was eighteen I ate corn, carrots and potatoes

Sue: That's alright, if they see you eating it then they might be different

Implicit in this dialogue is a construction of a good mother as one who is able to successfully manage the conflict around control and choice in relation to what children eat. Kelly and Angela positioned themselves as good mothers vis-à-vis this construction by attesting to the relaxed relationship that their children have with food, which means that they will often choose a non-food treat (such as a ride or a toy) without complaining. At the same time, participants did not unequivocally accept full responsible for children's eating habits and attributed difficulty managing children's diets to factors outside their control such as children's changing tastes ("what they liked yesterday they don't like today"), and socialisation outside the family ("my best friend doesn't like it, I'm not gonna eat that again"). Food choice was seen as an ongoing process of negotiation with children. As well, mothers negotiated their own responsibility for what children eat, as in Sue's statement: "it's our job to provide access to good nutritional food and it's up to them to decide how much they eat and what they eat, so since I've accepted that, now I'm a lot more relaxed". Kate reinforced this definition of responsibility saying "you should always put it on their plate and if they choose not to eat it then they don't have to". By defining the limits of responsibility for what children eat participants were able to diminish related guilt and anxiety, while still positioning themselves as good mothers. According choice and responsibility for eating to children is also in line with what are considered to be best child rearing practices (Coveney, 2004) in modern consumer society.

Advertising exploits the conflict surrounding food choice for children by positioning the product as a solution. Using the slogan "good for you, yummy for us" the LCMs ad constructs the product as something that meets the interests of both parents and children when it comes to what children eat. Similarly, by offering a product that is acceptable to both parents and children, the Wonder White ad resolves the conflict surrounding food choice for children. Both products have value in promising mothers the removal of guilt that usually results from allowing children to eat unhealthy food. This value was highly salient to participants and afforded them a practical solution to managing the conflict between control and choice. As Alicia said of the Wonder White commercial "as the mum, it's like feeling guilty that they will only eat white bread but at least it's got twice the fibre". Similarly, in the extract below Angela describes the very practical value of LCMs in providing her son with some nutrition when he refuses to eat breakfast:

Alicia: Well the no preservatives in that, that really gets me, you know like (inaudible) but they might hate them

Angela: I must admit Isaac eats those very regularly, those honey ones, he eats them instead, if I can't get him to eat breakfast, I can get him to eat one of those and I...

Kate: what's the sugar levels in those?

Angela: They're, the honey ones aren't too bad but there's vanilla flavoured ones and there's ones with M&Ms or Smarties on them I think...

Kelly: Yeah, they'd be shocking

Angela: They are, and the vanilla ones are very sickly and disgusting but the honey ones I don't think are too bad, I must admit I can't say I've had too much of a look because he loves them and, he's not gonna eat breakfast then, I don't care, as long as he's got something in him

Madden and Chamberlain (2004) argue that ads which emphasise enjoyment of food by children (such as the LCMs ad) function to construct mothers as responsible not only for the physical wellbeing of children but also their emotional wellbeing. Children's enjoyment of food is important not only in maintaining harmony, but also as an index of general wellbeing and emotional health. In interviews with mothers of two year old children, Morton and Santich (1996) found that having a child who ate 'well'[10] was regarded as praiseworthy and a source of envy from mothers whose children did not eat so well. In Morton and Santich's study, participants' constructions of themselves as 'good mothers' were clearly tied up with how their children ate. "The child's enjoyment was, in a way, recompense for the mother's efforts in preparing the meal and an acknowledgement that the mother was succeeding in her role of looking after the nutritional needs of the child" (Morton & Santich, 1996, p. 103). Morton and Santich's findings are supported in the present study by the importance that participants placed on fostering in children a "relaxed relationship to food".

Summary

In the way ads construct and address the viewer, mothers (much more than fathers) are made responsible for the dietary health of children. If a parent is represented then this is almost always the mother only as in the Nutri-Grain ad. More ambiguous ads such as the Wonder White commercial are positioned in a way which suggests targeting of a predominantly female audience. Although the Weetbix ad does address males through identification with a sporting figure, a distinction was made by participants between the health related and sports related appeals in the ad. Only the sporting appeals were seen as addressing fathers, while the health related appeals were perceived as addressing mothers.

The focus group discussion also revealed that participants held their mothers responsible for the development of their own eating habits, and this argument was used by participants to rationalise their otherwise guilt evoking behaviour of giving their children 'unhealthy' food. Participants described mealtimes as a source of conflict with children, and comments such as "food is such a battle" were common. In particular, participants struggled to balance the opposing imperatives to control children's diets in

[10] The researchers did not formally define 'good' eating habits, however they remarked that for participants, 'good' meant "having a good appetite, eating a wide variety of foods, being willing to try new foods, eating whatever is offered or feeding oneself" (Morton & Santich, 1996, p. 101)

the interest of good health and nutritional socialisation, and to give children choice in the interest of their emotional wellbeing. All participants articulated rules and strategies for managing children's diets while still providing choice. Participants also negotiated the extent to which they are responsible for what children eat. Ads such as those for LCMs and Wonder White exploit this conflict between mothers and children over eating by constructing the product as both healthy and tasty.

Clearly, the responsibility of mothers for feeding children extends beyond the physical effects of good nutrition, although this alone is a major source of anxiety for mothers. Feeding children epitomises and compounds the anxieties surrounding motherhood generally. Through what and how they feed children, mothers are made almost entirely responsible for children's physical and emotional health, socialisation and future success.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to explore the meaning of health in relation to food in modern consumer culture. By elucidating the assumptions that underlie intersecting food and health discourses, their ideological function can be determined and challenged. With these very broad aims in mind, it is easy to overlook, or take for granted, perhaps the most important finding of this study – that the relationship between food and health as constructed through advertising, and therefore by society, is the concern and responsibility of women and not men. As an explorative study, no hypotheses were put forth at the outset. I did not approach the research with a feminist agenda and it was never intended that the study focus on women. It was only as suitable ads (i.e. food ads that used health appeals) were collected that it became clear that women, almost exclusively, were the target audience of these ads. The ads consistently represented women in self-concerned or caring roles and addressed women's supposed concerns about beauty and good mothering. The ads were broadcast at times when a mostly female audience is present and in the context of other ads for products consumed by women.

In the ads targeted at single women the sales message was ostensibly health related but superficial in that the primary concern across most ads was with reducing fat and (implicitly) thereby retaining a desirable body image. Importantly, these ads showed how advertising perpetuates a thin ideal body for women, not only through direct representations of women's bodies, but by naturalising women's concern with body weight. In the ads in this study, monitoring one's diet was constructed as an essential and natural part of independent female living. Women were positioned as having a social and moral obligation to 'take care of' or 'look after' themselves by eating 'healthy' (i.e. low fat) foods in order to avoid guilt and maintain a construction of the self as 'good'. There was considerable fluidity between the notions of 'healthy eating' and 'low fat' such that they were almost interchangeable. This elision of meaning was apparent not only in the ads but also in the talk of participants who clearly regarded a slim body as an index of fitness and health, and importantly, as central to the definition of female beauty.

Both advertising representations and participants' understandings of the relationship between health and beauty reflect the actual convergence of the meanings surrounding health and beauty in mainstream Western culture. As articulated by writers such as Lupton (1996), the body is the key site of meaningful intersection between health and beauty, and body weight is central to popular understandings of both. Body weight is regulated primarily through diet and therefore food takes on value both in terms of health and beauty. While it is tempting to regard the relationship between health and body weight as natural, it is not difficult to challenge this assumption leading to the conclusion that the construction of body weight as a health issue is culture bound.

The collapsing together of health and beauty meanings has particular political implications. Naomi Wolf (1990) talks of how "the beauty myth" (which assigns value to women according to their physical appearance, without legitimate biological or historical justification), functions ideologically to disempower women by devaluing them and undermining their self worth. The attainment of beauty is constructed as an imperative for women who are forced "to compete for resources that men have

appropriated for themselves" (Wolf, 1990, p. 12). As the notions of health and beauty have increasingly aligned, the beauty myth has become more pervasive, insidious and robust. In the ads in this study, the pursuit of health was used to mask the pursuit of beauty through the attainment of a thin (healthy and beautiful) body. Disguising the beauty myth in this way makes it more difficult to contest and reject, and therefore more powerful as a tool of social control.

In both the ads targeted at single women and the ads which addressed mothers nutritional science explanations of health dominated. However, there was a fundamental difference between the two set of ads in the content of health appeals and in how the health value of the product was situated in relation to other product features. Health appeals in the ads directed at single women focused mainly on the fat content of the product. Health was rarely the main selling feature and was typically positioned as secondary to other product features such as convenience or ease. By contrast, the ads which targeted mothers privileged the health value of the product which was constructed in broader nutritional terms. These differences probably reflect the different supposed concerns of the target viewer suggesting that health has greater currency for mothers than single women. The dominance of nutritional science explanations of health in food advertising reflects the prevailing scientific world-view of Western culture in which biomedicine is seen as offering the best basis for understanding health. Nutritional science holds individuals responsible for health by emphasising informed and rational food choice. Other mainly structural influences upon eating are overlooked, as are other more holistic conceptions of the link between food and health. Nutritional science explanations of health fit well with consumerism. Advertising, by emphasising choice and hailing the subject as an individual 'you', turns all issues into individual rather than social concerns, proffering consumption as the fix-all solution (e.g., cf Beasley & Danesi, 2002; Dyer, 1982; Leiss et al., 1986; Williamson, 1978).

The ads targeted at mothers constructed and addressed the viewer as responsible for the dietary health of children, reflecting the reality that the tasks of purchasing and preparing food for the family are mainly left to women. The capacity of women to feed and nourish children in pregnancy and infancy gives a natural appearance to the role of women as providers of food and health. This biological 'fact' belies the socially determined nature of the role of mothering. Not only are mothers held responsible for feeding children, dietary health is used in advertising as a metonym for all aspects of well-being so that what and how children are fed is constructed as having considerable consequences for their physical as well as emotional welfare. Because these consequences are borne by the child, and not the mother, particularly strong moral judgements are visited upon mothers who are seen as placing children at risk by failing to provide a nutritionally optimal diet.

Although mothers are held responsible for the health of children, knowledge about health belongs to medico-scientific experts. The ownership of nutritional knowledge by experts, coupled with the variability of this knowledge, engenders in mothers anxiety over what children eat. Moreover, modern constructions of childhood emphasise the right of children to choose what and how much to eat. This necessarily leads to conflict at mealtimes as mothers struggle to balance the competing imperatives of allowing children choice while ensuring a healthy diet. The 'good' mother must successfully manage this conflict. The inevitable failure to do so leads to moral judgements and

undermines mothers' sense of self-worth. In the face of this threat to identity, participants were compelled to justify giving children unhealthy food, often privileging choice or using the argument that denying children such food ultimately causes them to overindulge in such foods.

Where health is constructed as a product attribute in advertising it becomes part of the products' exchange value so that 'health', and all that it means to be 'healthy', is consumed as much as the product is consumed. The targeting of either single women or mothers corresponds to the positioning of the viewer as either a direct or an indirect consumer respectively. In terms of *who* is addressed, the distinction between the two positions is not absolute, and a woman may be addressed as both a direct and an indirect consumer by the same ad. The Yakult ad for example, shows both a woman and a child drinking the product. Conversely, the same woman may be positioned differently by different ads. For example, while a woman may view the So Good ad from the position of a direct consumer, as a mother she may also view the LCMs ad from the position of an indirect consumer. In this study, separating single women and mothers into distinct groups was useful, but largely artificial. In order to understand, in a specific and detailed way, the ideologies that underpin appeals to health in food ads it was necessary to look at how women are positioned by these ads. Inasmuch as the ads in this study targeted either single women or mothers, it made sense to explore the specific assumptions and discourses that informed these positions, under the premise that they differ. Not making this distinction would likely have resulted in a less structured and possibly less detailed analysis. In reality, motherhood does not change a woman's identity so much as build upon it. Mothers are therefore doubly burdened by the ideologies of food and health, as they must struggle to position themselves as good in relation to what they eat, as well as what their children eat. A mother is judged twice, firstly for her own health (and appearance of health as evidenced by a slim body), and secondly, for the health of her children.

Clearly, for both single women and mothers, discourses relating to food and health respectively have strong moral underpinnings and the semantic oppositions of 'good' and 'bad' are fundamental to how food is categorised. The centrality of food and eating to self identity, combined with the public importance of health and an emphasis on individual control over eating, gives a highly moral dimension to food and health discourses, particularly where they intersect. It is the moral aspects of food and health discourses that create anxiety and ambivalence toward food for women as they are encouraged to use eating as a reward, comfort, and even a sex substitute, all of which threatens their moral being. Advertising is well located in this social context because it offers simple, individual solutions to what are complex and fundamentally irresolvable problems within the existing ideologies of consumer culture.

Assuming a social constructionist understanding of the nature of knowledge and reality, the findings of this study "are social artefacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people" (Gergen, 1985, p. 267). The conclusions I have drawn do not represent some kind of fundamental truth which transcends all people for all time. This is not seen as a weakness of this specific study so much as an inherent limitation of all research. Although the specific readings of ads generated in this study, both by myself as the researcher and by participants, are inescapably subjective and contextual, it must be remembered that the possibilities for making sense of a text are constrained by the cultural boundaries both of the message and its readers. A text

cannot mean just anything, and the readings of two different viewers, as members of the same culture, will have more in common than not. In addition, semiotics is more concerned with the structure than content of texts, for it is in the differences between signs that meaning is apparent (Saussure, 1983). In this study, semiotics provided a means for looking beyond the surface level meaning of the ads to the underlying cultural assumptions which are robust and tolerant of contradiction. Because structural approaches to the study of communication emphasise the oppositional nature of meaning, apparent contradictions are seen as pointing to a common underlying assumption. Thus, food can be both good and bad; what is revealed by these opposing constructions is the moral underpinning of food discourses.

The validity of the findings of this study is best determined by their resonance or the extent to which they demonstrate a kind of cultural authenticity. Readings of advertisements produced by participants constituted alternative interpretations against which to measure the authenticity of semiotic analyses. These readings also moved the analysis forward significantly by offering interpretations of ads that might otherwise have been overlooked. Particularly in the singles group, participants' ad interpretations went beyond the surface meaning of ads. While the dynamic 'back-and-forth' of the analytical process is not apparent in the final result, it is essential to the quality of research findings. Most importantly, the focus groups provided a context in which to situate both the process and results of interpretation and to explore and develop the ideological issues underpinning ad meanings. Essentially, the ideologies underpinning ads could be seen at work as the issues raised by the ads were taken up and discussed by participants. To illustrate this, numerous extracts from the focus group discussions are presented throughout the preceding chapter.

There are, of course, many ways in which the cultural assumptions identified in this study could be taken up and reframed within other ideologies. For example, the conflict between mothers and children over food may not be understood in terms of the competing moral imperatives of mothers to facilitate choice while ensuring a healthy diet, instead this conflict may be seen as only one aspect of the ongoing contestation and resistance by children of parental rules as part of constructing their emerging subjectivity. Such reframing need not be seen as a challenge to the validity of the findings of this study, as a particular cultural assumption or myth may simultaneously operate within different ideologies.

While the findings of this study are culturally and historically specific, this does not mean that they are subject to sudden change. Through the semiotic deconstruction of advertising, and analysis of discourse in action, this study has pointed to the myths surrounding food and health in modern consumer culture. These myths function ideologically to oppress women by positioning them in problematic ways. Women are stripped of power as they are unable to resolve the fundamental dilemmas in terms of which femaleness is constructed. Capitalist consumer ideology is well entrenched in Western culture, and as long as the oppression of women sustains the economic imperatives of this ideology, change is unlikely. The push for change must come from women themselves and depends on them first seeing their self-doubt and powerlessness not as natural, but as enforced; not as inevitable, but as changeable. In order to change the world, we must first change ourselves. As long as the assumptions underpinning the oppressive ideologies of food and health appear natural, rather than mythical, they cannot be challenged. By exposing these assumptions, and

thereby laying them open to challenge, this study makes a clear and worthwhile social contribution.

Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

Below is a list of prompts that were used to guide the focus group discussions. This list was not distributed to participants and was used only as a guide for myself when facilitating the focus groups. This list is presented here to give the reader a sense of the general scope and content of the discussions.

⇒ Can you think of any food products that are advertised as healthy?
⇒ Have you seen this ad before / are you familiar with the advertised product?
⇒ Do you buy this product? Do you buy products like it?
⇒ How do you think this ad tries to sell this product?
⇒ What do you think of the claims that this ad makes?
⇒ Do you think this ad is informative? Why / why not?
⇒ Do you think this ad has anything to do with health?
⇒ Who does most of the grocery shopping in your household?
⇒ Do you consider health when food shopping? In what way? To what extent?
⇒ Do you compare / consider nutrition information when choosing products?
⇒ What health information do you look for on packaged food?
⇒ What does health mean to you? In relation to food?
⇒ What kinds of food do you think are healthy?
⇒ Do you think this ad is targeted at you / people like you?
⇒ Describe the target audience for this ad / what kind of person buys this product?
⇒ Do you like this ad? Why / why not?
⇒ Who is responsible for your health? Your children's / family's / husband's health?
⇒ Besides advertising, where do you get information about health and healthy food?
⇒ Do you feel this information is very reliable?
⇒ Is this a topic that you feel you need more information about? If so, what questions would you like answered?

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