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"His" Steak, "Her" Salad: How Food Advertising Endorses Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are present throughout modern culture and society; what we often overlook is how prominently gender stereotypes are intertwined in food and beverage advertising. Certain foods and drinks are depicted as "masculine," while others are perceived as "feminine." These inclinations work to preserve gender stereotypes that men are brute, large, and tough, while women are dainty, small, and fragile. Food and beverage advertising has a wide audience and further cements these gender stereotypes. Tragically, this advertising's act of imposing gender stereotypes into everyday life causes heightened concern over body image in women in particular, which carries detrimental consequences.

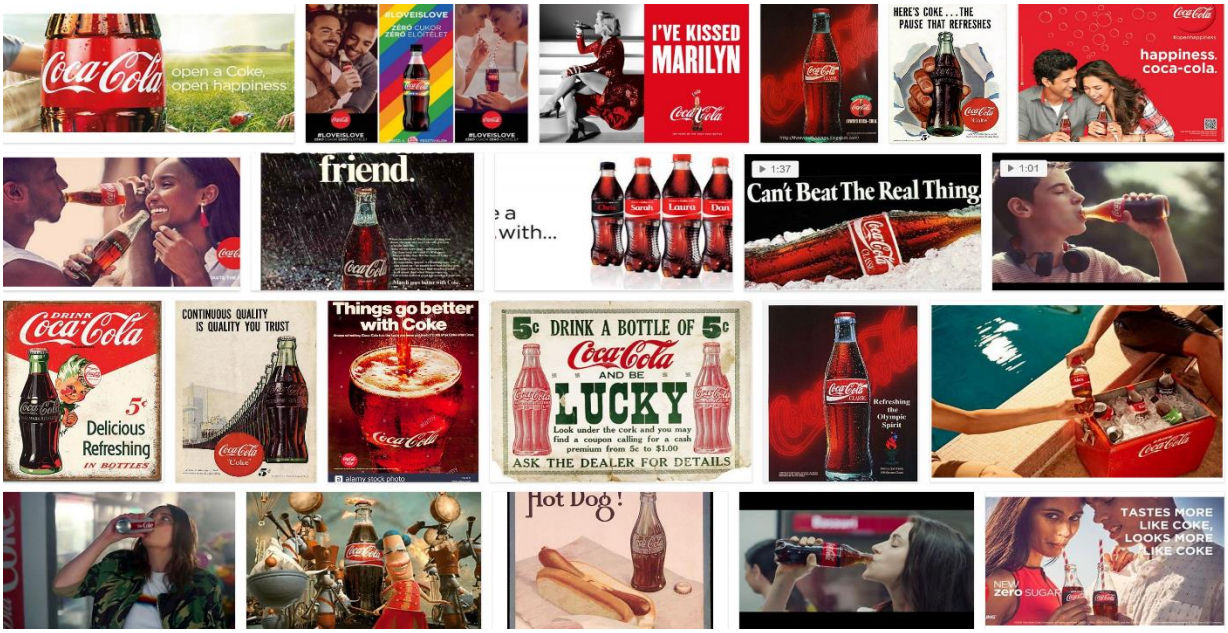
"Masculine" food companies inject manly stereotypes of strength and bulk into society. Meat is one of many keystone masculine food items. Meats in general carry a masculine identity because eating them is associated with gaining strength through protein. Men are typically viewed as the protectors of their homes via being physically strong, so meat is the perfect "masculine" meal to ensure they retain this strength. Meat itself is obtained through killing other animals, such as through hunting in certain instances. Hunting involves asserting dominance (over other animals), another masculine trope. Predatory animals, such as lions, bears, and wolverines, are known to be strong and fierce because of their carnivorous nature. Patterns of meat, strength, and assertion of dominance link carnivores to men, and thus strength and dominance to men as well, perpetuating meat as a main symbol for masculinity. During my fieldwork, I observed college-aged males at a table next to mine at a sports bar. The men collectively attacked one of their friends verbally for ordering a salad instead of a burger. Food companies know this type of behavior exists, so they use masculinity to market their products.

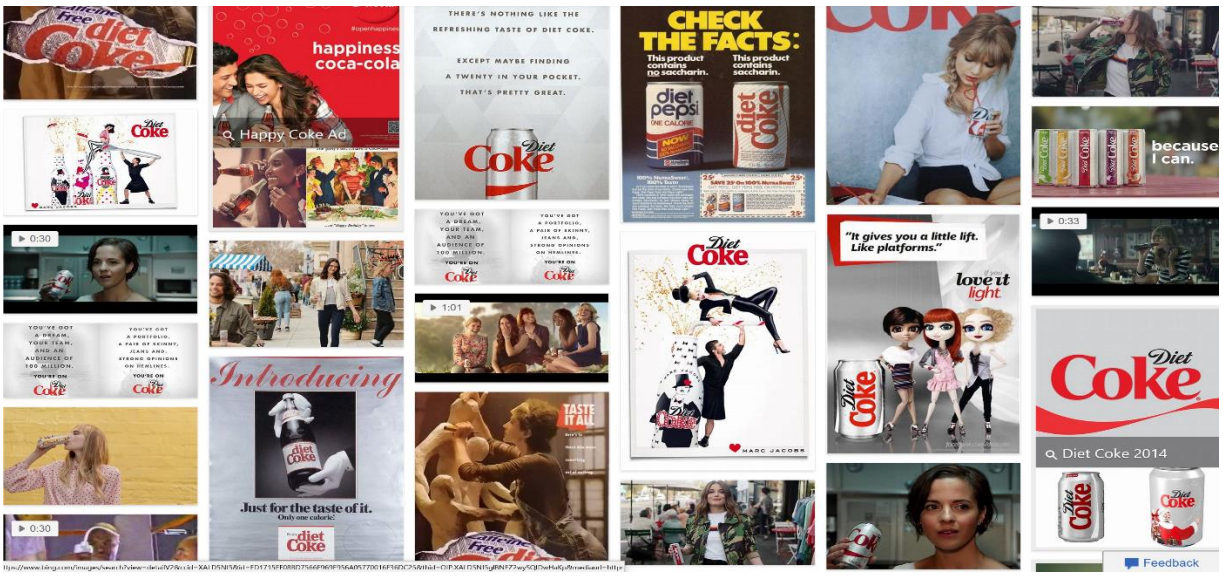
As a result, there is a general pattern of meat-based companies taking masculine approaches to branding and advertising. For example, Buffalo Wild Wings elected to have a massive, strong, dominant buffalo to brand their male-dominated wing and sports atmosphere. Beef Jerky companies, such as Jack Links, The Jerky Guy, and Dukes, rely virtually exclusively on male-branded marketing. A series of commercials by Jack Links portrayed a sasquatch—a large, hairy, masculine figure—at the forefront of their campaign. Fast-food chains such as KFC, Popeyes, Burger King, Jimmy Johns, and Five Guys, all of which are meat-based companies, employ masculine branding or masculine names. This branding solidifies gender stereotypes and norms in a negative light; it implies "Be a man, eat meat like you are supposed to" without explicitly stating such. Other companies, however, take advantage of feminine stereotypes to maximize profits, although often at the expense of female consumers.

"Feminine" foods are perceived as those that seem less carnivorous, more delicate, and healthier. They include foods such as salads and fruits, as well as sweet foods such as cakes and pastries. Dessert companies are particularly feminine. Two of the leading manufacturers of desserts found in grocery stores, Little Debbie and Hostess, contain feminine names and imagery in their branding. Just as "masculine" foods enforce how men are supposed to be strong, "feminine" foods enforce how women are supposed to be delicate and sweet. More dangerous than the narrative that women must be sweet, however, is the narrative that women should eat healthier items such as salads, avocado toast, and fruits. This narrative reinforces the stereotype that women need to pay particular attention to their body image. Unlike men, who are encouraged to eat meat, women feel constant pressure to watch their figure by eating leaner and healthier foods. This notion is often visible in advertisements. While these advertisements do not explicitly state that women should consume healthier foods, the presence of women in dieting

commercials is large. “Women especially became a priority to many companies…women are usually seen as the stay at home mom who cooks the food and tries to focus on their body image. Products such as Lean Cuisine, Betty Crocker and others jumped right on this advertising train” (Madar). While some dieting advertisements do target men, there are an overwhelming number dedicated to women. According to a variety of studies depicted in Wilson and Blackhurst’s work, “The prevalence of dieting is such that it now legitimately be considered a normative, although not benign, female experience” (Wilson and Blackhurst 118). With particular attention to magazines, Wilson and Blackhurst note how food advertising takes advantage of the customer. They describe how dieting advertisements “encourage dieting by marketing food products based on their low-fat or no-fat status and, by default, endorse the widespread fear and loathing of fat” (Wilson and Blackhurst 119).

Unfortunately, the beverage industry is no different than the food industry in perpetuating gender stereotypes; beverage companies often target women in particular with their low-sugar drinks. While numerous examples of women-targeting ads exist, Coca Cola is a simple example; below are the search results from searching “Coke ad” and “Diet Coke ad” on Bing images, with the top image being “Coke ad” and the bottom “Diet Coke ad.”





A simple Bing search suggests that women are the target market for Diet Coke, while regular Coke's advertising is more gender neutral. While only an unscientific search, Bing collects data from a worldwide database of sources, demonstrating that the most popular images for each search are those that enforce a gender norm that women need to maintain the ideal body image. On the other hand, male-focused advertising for beverages, such as beer, champions drinking to enjoy a good time as opposed to maintaining a body image.

Beer is a symbolic masculine drink. "Cracking open a cold one with the boys," in reference to beer, has become a popular phrase in society. During my fieldwork, I noticed that people automatically gave beer to men at house/fraternity parties, whereas people automatically offered mixed drinks and wine to women. This tendency is likely due to the stereotype that men love beer, while women are meant to avoid the manly beer and drink their feminine wine or mixed drinks, which gender norms suggest would be the case. Beer ads across the country depict men interacting with other men and having a good time. "Friendship between men then becomes the center of the advertisement because it promotes solidarity among the group members and

reinforces the idea of masculine bonding through drinking and the prevention of becoming feminine" (Hall and Kappel 572). Beer commercials are heavily concentrated with men as opposed to women. When women appear, they are often sexualized; these women are typically models with skinny physiques who are there at the will of the man. Beer itself is known for causing "beer bellies," which are typically considered far from an ideal body image; however, male advertising rarely discusses this body image. There is lowered attention to it and therefore lower fear of not having the ideal body image than in female advertising. Generally speaking, there are not nearly as many alcohol commercials with women in comparison to men. "One historic reason for the strict alcohol rules, norms, and mores imposed on women is the relationship, or lack thereof, between alcohol and femininity in the media" (Hall and Kappel 573). Thus, alcoholic beverage commercials enforce gender stereotypes that the men need not focus on their bodies. Beer commercials and Diet Coke ads juxtapose what society expects men and women to consume.

The "masculine" foods and beverages, such as meat and beer, highlight how men need not concern themselves with body image and focus on being a man; however, the "feminine" food and beverages, such as diet foods and diet beverages, illuminate society's unfair expectation that women must preserve the "ideal" body image. This situation has a negative impact on women by putting increased pressure on them to focus on maintaining what society has deemed a healthy body, especially when ads appear everywhere that reinforce this notion. As a result, women often feel forced to accept gender stereotypes that say that they should focus on dieting instead of consuming meat and alcohol as men do. Moreover, women are under increased pressure to abide by this stereotype because of unfair discrimination against women who are perceived to be overweight. Fat women are less likely to be hired than skinny women, and are

much more likely to be harassed in the workplace (Fikkan and Rothblum 576-577). Fat women are also less likely to be accepted into certain universities, inhibiting their academic experiences (Fikkan and Rothblum 579). These issues can negatively impact mental health as well. Failure to obtain a desired education, job, or work environment can lead to anxiety and depression. Another factor that can cause depression is lack of romantic relationships. Fat women have fewer opportunities to date and engage in sexual activity (Fikkan and Rothblum 581). Furthermore, the concept of the "perfect body" can cause some women to develop eating disorders such as bulimia in their pursuit of this ideal. "Food advertisements contribute to social norms that place girls and women at risk for the development of eating disorders" (Wilson and Blackhurst 120). While food advertisements may not have created these norms, they serve to exploit them to their advantage.

The gender stereotypes for "masculine" and "feminine" foods and drinks can have detrimental effects on women by increasing pressure on them to focus on their body image. Advertising about said foods and drinks only serves to hyperbolize the stereotypes and emphasize daily how "idyllic" it is for people to follow gender stereotypes for food. Fortunately, not all food advertisements, or foods in general, abide by these stereotypes. While these stereotypes remain deeply rooted in today's society, there is hope that food and beverage companies begin to expand their horizons in today's progressive climate by targeting more than just one gender.

Works Cited

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