

## **Sexy Food: The Ethics Behind Food Advertising**

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### **Abstract**

*This research paper explores whether or not it is ethical for food advertisers to sexualize food as a means of selling a product, despite the increasing prevalence of eating disorders in America, primarily anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Sexualized food advertisements enforce the ideas of forbidden foods and food products as lovers, as well as promote an overly-thin body ideal. These messages are dangerous and can contribute to the development of eating disorders. However, cultural expectations and biological predispositions also play a role in eating disorder development. Using the theories of Deontology, the Veil of Ignorance, and Steven Pinker's Moral Codes of harm, community, and fairness to analyze the ethics of food advertisements, it appears unethical for food advertisers to continue to sexualize food for personal financial gain while eating disorders are on the rise in America.*

### **Introduction**

When we think of the words guilt, pleasure, sinful, forbidden, and ecstasy, what images come to mind? What connotation does the phrase “sins of the flesh” conjure? Is it food, or is it sex—or perhaps both? Similar language is used to describe both food and sex, which represent two powerful human drives that dictate many of our behaviors. The parallel appetites for food and sex can drive us to great pleasure, as well as great despair, whether overindulged or unnaturally repressed. Stanford University researcher Mary Eberstadt writes that sex, once the frontrunner of American cultural taboos, has undergone a remarkable loosening of traditional rules and regulations over the past fifty years (32). In this same time period, cultural guidelines about food and eating have tightened, and a sort of moral code regarding food choices has developed. Strict regulation of the sexual appetite has been replaced with strict regulation of the appetite for food, and in this way food has been sexualized. Food has been equated with sex, which is evident in the many sexually-charged food advertisements that permeate our everyday lives.

The strong sexualization of food has been paralleled by a sharp rise in the prevalence of eating disorders in America, primarily anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Anorexia nervosa is characterized by a “relentless pursuit of thinness” achieved through self-imposed starvation, highly restrictive dieting, or excessive exercise (“Anorexia Nervosa”). Bulimia nervosa is characterized by frequent episodes of bingeing, or consuming large amounts of food, followed by compensatory behavior such

as purging, or forced vomiting, extremely strenuous exercise, and fasting (“Bulimia Nervosa”). According to the National Eating Disorder Association, eating disorder rates have risen each decade since 1930, and bulimia rates among young women tripled between 1988 and 1993 (“Statistics: Eating Disorders and their Precursors”). Currently, eating disorders are being diagnosed more frequently among younger age groups, diverse ethnic groups, and males, and nearly half of the American population personally know someone suffering from an eating disorder (“Facts About Eating Disorders”). While biology and culture play some role in eating disorder development, food advertisements frequently promote dangerous risk factors including the notion of forbidden foods, food as a lover, and a super-thin body ideal. If the sexualization and subsequent stigmatization of food that is presented in food advertisements is contributing to the rise of deadly eating disorders and increased cultural anxiety about food, is it ethical for food advertisers to sexualize food for monetary gain? Several theories can be utilized to analyze the ethics of food advertisements, including Deontology, the Veil of Ignorance, and Steven Pinker’s Moral Codes of “harm, fairness, [and] community” as discussed in “The Moral Instinct” (36). It appears unethical that food advertisers, who should be selling food based on taste and nutrition, are sexualizing food for personal advancement. The negative cultural effects and increased prevalence of eating disorders due to the sexualized food imagery present in advertisements do not seem worth the monetary gain.

### **Forbidden Foods**

Sexualizing food can lead to negative attitudes and increased anxiety about food and eating, according to Eberstadt’s article “Is Food the New Sex?”. Technological innovations have made sexual activity and food much safer, thus reducing the stigmas associated with both indulgences. These advances, coupled with a loosening of traditional religious restraints imposed on sex, have made premarital sex more socially acceptable. Eberstadt writes that food has become sexualized because “Unable or unwilling (or both) to impose rules on sex at a time when it is easier to pursue it than ever before, yet equally unwilling to dispense altogether with a universal moral code... modern man...has taken longstanding morality about sex, and substituted it onto food” (40). She claims that in an increasingly sexual society, people are unwilling to entirely dispense with their moral codes, so they simply transfer them onto some other aspect of their lives. In *Good Girls Don’t Eat Dessert*, Rosalyn M. Meadow and Lillie Weiss

160

discuss one of psychologist Sigmund Freud's theories that "people [can]...substitute oral pleasure for genital pleasure" (102). Through this substitution of morals and pleasure from sex to food, many dangerous eating habits and attitudes have been normalized, including the notion of forbidden foods.

Forbidden foods take their root in the biblical tale of Genesis. After creating earth, God creates Adam and Eve and commands them not to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree of knowledge. However, the beauty and abundance of the tree is too tempting, and they give in to desire, causing God to place a curse over all humanity. While the ramifications of indulging in such foods may have changed, food advertisements today promote a very similar obsession with a number of forbidden foods that are considered off-limits. This obsession is created through the words and imagery used to advertise foods: the erotic qualities of food are highlighted in advertisements to arouse consumers (Meadow and Weiss 20). Just as movies and books once promoted a stigma of overly romanticized, unattainable sex, food advertisements today promote a stigma of so-called "bad foods": foods high in calories, fat, sugar, or salt, and "good foods": foods labeled diet, fat-free, or low-cal. Such labeling of foods is dangerous because "when food is sex, eating becomes a moral issue...the 'good girl' today is the thin girl, the one who keeps her appetite for food (and power, sex, and equality) under control" (Kilbourne 115). By sexualizing food, deciding what to eat becomes a dangerous moral battlefield rather than a simple matter of personal taste.

Pinker writes that a universal moral concept people believe is that "it's bad to harm others and good to help them" (36). So is it ethical for food advertisers to promote sexualized, forbidden foods in order to make money if people are being harmed? When people are presented with the choice of a good food or a bad food, they are naturally inclined to restrict themselves to only the morally acceptable, "good" foods. Just as Adam and Eve are punished for eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge, consumers are afraid of the punishment they will receive for eating bad, high-calorie and high-fat foods. Indulging in such foods risks weight gain and the possible loss of social acceptance—fat is seen as unsightly and "an indication of moral weakness" (Meadow and Weiss 168). So rather than indulge and gain weight, people restrict themselves to only good, healthy, moral foods. Such restrictive dieting and intense fear of fat and calories is a hallmark of anorexia, a disease with a mortality rate twelve times greater than any other

cause of death for females aged 15 to 24 (“Eating Disorders Statistics”). Furthermore, excluding a food from the diet only serves to make it more tempting and enticing, so showing a food as forbidden increases anxiety about food. If extreme worry, harmful self-imposed starvation, and possible death are the result of sexualizing food, surely it is not ethical for food advertisers to do so—they clearly put consumers in a dangerous and harmful situation. To continue to sexualize foods despite the potentially negative effects on society does not respect the ethical value of freedom from harm.

### *The Pursuit of Thinness*

Food advertisements often feature images of extremely thin, skimpily clad women as models or spokespersons for their product. However, it seems contradictory to use a nearly-emaciated figure to promote a food product. Is it ethical for food advertisers to sexualize and glamorize extreme thinness to make money, and can ultra-thin models be considered trustworthy product advocates? According to Immanuel Kant’s ethical theory of Deontology, people have a moral duty not to use others as a means of personal gain or advancement. Many food advertisers act based upon the ability to make a profit—rather than truthfully represent their product, they rely on sexually charged advertisements promoting the thin ideal to draw in customers, which conflicts with their moral duty not to use others as a means to an end.

One such sexually-charged advertisement, for a diet cheese product, features an image of an extremely thin, nearly naked model wearing the advertisement’s caption around her waist like a belt: “Everybody could use a little less fat” (Wilson and Blackhurst). The advertisement sends a clear message, which is that women can never be too thin. This type of advertisement tells women “that they are not okay the way they are, that they need to trim their waists down and get rid of their flab before they will be found acceptable”, according to Meadow and Weiss (26). If even the thinnest of supermodels is made to feel inadequate and that she should scrutinize her body, the everyday woman must be doubly concerned with her own appearance. While advertisements are meant to tempt consumers to purchase a food, they also serve to reinforce negative body perceptions and feelings of inadequacy and shame that arise from indulging in certain foods. Food advertisements “are constructed in a way that suggests that women will lose this [perpetual beauty] contest unless they buy the right food product”, according to Wilson and Blackhurst. Food advertisers explicitly seek to create

body dissatisfaction as a means to sell a product—they prey upon the body insecurities of others as a method of making money, which is not ethical according to Deontology.

The idolization of extreme thinness promoted in food advertisements is a dangerous behavior that can lead to and is characteristic of eating disorders, primarily anorexia. Author and eating disorder survivor Marya Hornbacher writes in her memoir *Wasted* that “we speak as if there was one collective perfect body...underneath all this normal flesh, buried deep in the excessive recesses of our healthy bodies, there [is] a Perfect Body just waiting to break out. It would look exactly like everyone else’s perfect body” (47). Rather than appreciating the body as a part of the self, the body is viewed with disdain as a separate, loathsome entity that must be molded into some arbitrary, undefined “perfect body”. Food advertisers exploit insecurities about lacking the perfect body as a means to make money, which promotes extremely dangerous eating behaviors and undermines stability regarding food and eating. Using other people as a means of financial gain while supporting and inducing harmful disordered eating strongly violates the ethical duty described by Deontology.

#### *Food Products as Lovers*

The harmful food labels and super-thin body ideal promoted by food advertisements through food sexualization are accompanied by another dangerous phenomenon: sexualized food is conferred with near-magic qualities and comes to be seen as a lover instead of a product. Advertisements for sexualized foods promise feelings of comfort, happiness, and gratification which can also be experienced through sex, and in this way food becomes a lover. As Meadow and Weiss write, “food is love and sex and closeness and comfort...and food is a very seductive lover. Unlike other lovers, it is always there when you want it ... all it takes is a few steps to the refrigerator...to get your daily love fix” (124). However, eroticized foods “are endowed not only with the power to arouse, but with a moral power as well...Eroticized food is seen as sinful”, as it is often high in calories, fat, or sugar (Meadow and Weiss 20). This sinful quality serves to make sexualized foods more exhilarating to eat, much the way a sexual encounter seems more exciting because of its naughty, forbidden nature.

The Veil of Ignorance, an ethical theory originally described by John Rawls, states that if one were to wear a veil concealing one’s place in society when making decisions, one would choose what is most beneficial to everyone because one would be unaware of

one's own position and hope to ensure personal stability (Freeman). From this viewpoint, it seems unethical that food advertisers continue to sexualize food because they are considering their own financial gain without considering what effects their advertisements have on consumers. Marketing food as a lover only serves to worsen conflicts with food. The erotic qualities and promises of happiness and contentment displayed in food advertisements promote indulging in what are often high-calorie foods. These indulgences can lead to weight gain, which creates despair and unhappiness because thinness is so glamorized and adored. Food advertisers then take advantage of this dilemma through their advertisements in order to sell their products and “fuel the mistaken belief...that restrictive dieting can be successful if only the right products are obtained—products that will magically transform [people's] diets and even their lives” (Wilson and Blackhurst). By marketing food as an ever-present lover or as a magic cure for eating dilemmas, food advertisers further conflict over food in an effort to ensure their own fiscal stability, which goes against the ethics of the Veil of Ignorance. Food advertisers use this strategy because “compulsive eaters, obviously, are going to spend a great deal more on the [product] than are the people who eat it infrequently...no matter what a company is selling, the heavy user is their best customer” (Kilbourne 121). By normalizing dangerous attitudes about food, advertisers are ensuring their own success by luring in customers. Food advertisers look at their personal gain without observing the situation as a consumer and recognizing the dangerous conflicting messages associated with promoting food as a lover, which is unethical according to Rawls' theory.

### **The Role of Western Culture**

Despite the immoral appearance of many food advertisements, other highly significant factors are at play regarding the development of an eating disorder, especially culture. Anorexia and bulimia are primarily found in wealthy, developed Western countries that emphasize the importance of appearances and thinness, and within those countries women tend to be the most affected, making up about eighty-five to ninety-five percent of those who suffer from eating disorders (“Statistics: Eating Disorders and their Precursors”). In many non-Western cultures, a larger, more curvy and voluptuous figure is celebrated as it represents health, fertility, and social status—only those with enough economic power can access enough food to achieve such a rounded, nourished body (Frederick, Forbes, and Berezovskaya 204). This knowledge makes it difficult to pin

blame on food advertisers, and rather “The prevalence of eating and body image problems is evidence that rather than representing pathology on the part of individual ... such behavior reflects pathology in our culture” (Wilson and Blackhurst). Surely in a country where 24 million people suffer from eating disorders, some common cultural factor is at work (“Eating Disorders Statistics”).

The introduction of Western culture via television to the non-Western Fijian islands in 1995 is a shocking illustration of the effects that Western culture can induce, according to an article from Harvard University researcher Anne E. Becker (534). Traditionally, Fijian culture valued a robust body size and lacked social pressures to be thin—in fact, “going thin” and dieting were regarded as dangerous and unnecessary behaviors, and eating disorders were essentially unheard of (Becker 538). However, within three years of television’s introduction and exposure to Western cultural ideals, the number of teenagers at risk for eating disorders doubled and nearly three quarters of teenagers felt that they were “too fat” and needed to diet (Kilbourne 135). Similarly, in a study comparing body dissatisfaction and ideals among Western and non-Western nations, both women and men from the United States were more likely to express body dissatisfaction and describe a smaller ideal body size than respondents from Ghana, who are significantly less exposed to Western cultural values (Frederick, Forbes, and Berezovskaya 212). While these cases do not conclusively prove that Western culture causes eating disorders, they do indicate that Western emphasis on thinness, dieting, and appearances play a significant role in promoting body dissatisfaction and risky eating behaviors.

According to Pinker, a universally respected ethic is “loyalty to a group...and conformity to its norms” (36). Perhaps by presenting images of extremely thin models and promoting a diet mentality, food advertisers are actually being ethical and upholding community rather than destroying it—they are supporting common Western cultural values, even though the ethicality of the values themselves is questionable. Meadow and Weiss write that “it is important to point out that fat is not universally seen as ugly, and antifat attitudes are limited primarily to affluent Western nations” (168). Most of the few non-Western cases of eating disorders lack the obsessive weight concerns associated with the Western classification of the diseases, according to a study by Harvard researchers Pamela K. Keel and Kelly L. Klump. If food advertisers were to promote the healthy

eating habits and more full-figured, natural looking body ideal of non-Western cultures, they would be unethically acting against the community value by deviating from the norm. Perhaps it is not the food advertisements that should be questioned, but the culture itself. By promoting the antifat attitudes and diet mentality characteristic of Western culture, food advertisers may be acting ethically in maintaining common Western cultural ideals.

### **The Role of Biology and Personality**

Food advertisements promote dangerous eating behaviors, but several biological factors and personal characteristics may also be at the root of eating disorders. Hornbacher notes that “many people who get eating disorders have a preexisting chemical depression or other biological predispositions that lead to eating-disordered behavior...the chemical imbalance that malnutrition induces may lead to depression, which in turn is dealt with through eating-disordered behavior” (195). Current research suggests that “specific genetic loci” may contribute to eating disorder susceptibility and that eating disorder heritability is nearly fifty percent (Keel and Klump). While food advertisements do encourage negative eating habits, these findings implicate biology as a main factor in the development of eating disorders.

Furthermore, many eating-disordered patients have similar personality traits. Psychologist Michael W. Wiederman writes that most anorexics exhibit “a high degree of compulsivity, rigidity, perfectionism, and general constraint” (306). These qualities often exist prior to the development of the eating disorder and are exacerbated by the disorder, thereby perpetuating the cycle: the individual craves control and perfection, which manifests in the form of an eating disorder. The eating disorder induces chemical changes in the brain that cause an addiction much like any drug addiction, and dangerous eating behaviors get worse as the individual feels the need for more control. Hornbacher writes that “at a certain point, an eating disorder ceases to be ‘about’...your family or your culture...it becomes an addiction not only emotionally but also chemically...You are also doing it for yourself” (64). Eating disorders appear to be strongly related to an individual’s biological makeup and personality, which takes some of the blame away from food advertisers.

Pinker writes that another moral universal is “a sense of fairness: that one should...reward benefactors and punish cheaters” (36). If eating disorders have deep-set

roots in biology and personality, it seems unfair, and therefore unethical, to pin the blame for eating disorders on food advertisers when it is truly an issue beyond their control. Food advertisers cannot be held responsible for the biological predispositions and personality traits of the audience their advertisements reach, so it is not fair or ethical to make them fully accountable for the sharp rise in eating disorders that has paralleled the sexualization of food presented in advertisements. However, biological and personal attributes do not fully excuse food advertisers from their role in promoting dangerous eating behaviors and disorders: preexisting biological conditions and personality traits may be exacerbated by hyper-sexualized images of food presented in advertisements. The individual may load the gun, but food advertisers are capable of pulling the trigger.

### **Conclusion**

The sexualization of food that has occurred across America over the past fifty years has been accompanied by a frightening rise in eating disorder rates, especially among younger age groups. Sexualized food images are frequently found in advertisements for food products as means to entice consumers. However, these images promote dangerous ideas and behaviors considered risk factors in eating disorder development. By sexualizing and presenting foods as both forbidden objects and lovers and by idolizing a dangerously thin body ideal, food advertisers are sending conflicting, harmful messages to consumers: that they should limit themselves only to good, low-calorie and low-fat foods, but that bad, high-calorie and high-fat foods are delicious and not to be ignored, and that somehow a toned, taught, supermodel-thin body ought to be maintained through this conflict. These harmful contradictory messages and increased prevalence of eating disorders bring into question whether it is ethical for food advertisers to sexualize food for personal monetary gain.

Using the theories of Deontology, the Veil of Ignorance, and Steven Pinker's Moral Codes of harm, community, and fairness, the ethicality of sexualizing food in advertisements was analyzed. According to Deontology, it is unethical to put others in harm's way for personal advancement, yet food advertisers promote and normalize dangerous eating behaviors as a means of financial gain. The Veil of Ignorance states that if every person were to wear a veil making them ignorant of their place in society, people would make decisions that are best for everyone because they do not know their own position, and that this is the most ethical method of evaluating a decision's effect.

However, food advertisers only look at their own personal monetary growth rather than looking at the negative effects on consumers of sexualizing food. Food advertisers also violate Pinker's ethical value of freedom from harm by presenting sexualized images of food and promoting ideas that are risk factors for developing eating disorders. Utilizing these theories in research, the hypothesis that it is unethical for food advertisers to sexualize food is supported. By placing consumers in harmful situations without acknowledging their viewpoint, all for the purpose of personal financial gain, food advertisers are acting unethically. The ethical theories support the research, but the research also helps to support the ethical theories. By sexualizing food, advertisers are knowingly violating consumer rights to make healthy, educated decisions about what to eat—an innate right that ethical theories provide protection for.

Despite violating many ethical theories, food advertisers may be supporting Pinker's values of community and group loyalty by presenting ultra-thin models and sexualized foods. Western culture currently tends to emphasize appearances and thinness and may be a greater culprit than food advertisers in the rise of eating disorders. Biological predispositions and personality may also play a role in the development of eating disorders, so to blame food advertisers entirely violates the ethical sense of fairness described by Pinker. Biology and personality is out of the control of food advertisers, so it is unfair and unethical to blame them. Although food advertisers cannot be held fully responsible for the rise in eating disorders, they exacerbate cultural and biological influences. Furthermore, the community values supported by advertisers are themselves harmful—promoting such conflicting messages about food and a super-thin body ideal may be upholding cultural values that are actually serving to undermine culture. And while it is not fair to blame food advertisers for biological predispositions, neither is it fair to excuse them entirely of the dangerous role that they do play. This research does not totally undermine Pinker's ethical values of community and fairness, but suggests these values are a bit more flexible than the others because they can be manipulated to support both sides of an ethical argument.

Deontology, the Veil of Ignorance, and Pinker's moral codes of harm, community, and fairness, are useful analytical tools in determining whether the sexualization of food by advertisers is ethical given the rise in eating disorders in America. The theories support the research and show that food advertisers are acting unethically by sexualizing

food. Eroticized food is endowed with a dangerous immoral quality and tends to undermine cultural stability regarding food. However, the research shows that some ethical theories are easily stretched and manipulated depending upon the situation and may not be the best indication of ethicality. The negative, dangerous effects of sexualizing food on a large audience of consumers seem to outweigh the monetary gains received by a few advertisers, so sexualizing food appears to be unethical. Food is meant to sustain life, yet sexualizing food does just the opposite—it takes away stability about food and encourages deadly eating disorders, and is therefore an unethical practice.

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