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Alex O'Hagan, L. (2020) Pure in body, pure in mind? A sociohistorical perspective on the marketisation of pure foods in great Britain. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 34. 100325.
ISSN: 2211-6958

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2019.100325>

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Pure in Body, Pure in Mind?
A Sociohistorical Perspective on the Marketisation of Pure Foods in Great Britain

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Abstract

This paper explores the marketisation of 'pure' from the late nineteenth century to modern-day using examples of food packaging and advertising. Adopting a sociohistorical approach to the theoretical perspective of social semiotics, it draws attention to the arbitrariness of the term and demonstrates how, over time, advertisers have constructed a particular discourse that equates the purity of a food product with a physical, mental or spiritual type of purity. In doing so, they invest food with a moral authority and legitimacy that leads consumers to understand commodities through marketing discourses and buy into the lifestyle and cultural value that the product promises, although it may not be true. In emphasising how purity has historically been used as a rhetorical device to sell products, the study hopes to encourage consumers to challenge food advertising and be aware of the myths that it can create in order to become empowered and make informed choices about supposedly healthy products.

Keywords

Pure food; advertising; marketisation; religion; gender; class

Biography

Dr Lauren Alex O'Hagan is a postdoctoral researcher in the Centre for Language and Communication Research at Cardiff University. Her research concerns inscriptive practices of the early twentieth century, particularly those concerning the working classes. She recently completed a PhD in Language and Communication with a thesis entitled 'Class, Culture and Conflict in the Edwardian Book Inscription: A Multimodal Ethnohistorical Approach'. She has published extensively on literacy and scribal practices, consumption culture and social class in Victorian and Edwardian Britain.

Pure in Body, Pure in Mind?

A Sociohistorical Perspective on the Marketisation of 'Pure' Foods in Great Britain

1. Introduction

Green, natural, eco-friendly, clean, pure... walk down the aisles of any supermarket today and you will see such food buzzwords plastered across packaging. Yet, these buzzwords are nothing new. 'Pure', for example, has deep historical roots that can be traced back to late nineteenth-century Britain when it became adopted by advertisers in response to the passing of the 1875 Sale of Food and Drugs Act, which banned illegal adulterated foods. Despite the legal meaning of 'pure' as "a single ingredient food to which nothing has been added and that is free from avoidable contamination with other foods" (Food Standards Agency, 2002), it has been used by advertisers to claim anything from physical endurance and mental wellbeing to organic, gluten-free and vegan (Getz, 2009; Bosgraaf, 2015). Thus, 'pure' stands as a seminal example of how a word with clear legal origins becomes colonised, shaped and remarketed time and time again by advertisers to increase their competitiveness and financial gain.

Through the analysis of food packaging and advertising from the late nineteenth century to the introduction of the Trade Descriptions Act in 1968 (which clamped down on false advertising claims), this paper investigates how the marketisation of 'pure' has evolved over time. It adopts a sociohistorical approach to social semiotics, grounding multimodal analysis in evidence from archival records, to draw attention to the arbitrariness of the term and demonstrate how consumers can be led to understand commodities through marketing discourses. This, in turn, may motivate them to buy a product, erroneously believing that they will obtain the lifestyle and cultural value that it promises (Rousseau, 2012).

While there are a wide range of studies that have explored food packaging and advertising using a social semiotic approach (e.g. Tresidder, 2010; Oswald, 2012; Guseva, 2015; Wagner, 2015; Barnes, 2017; Maffei, Schifferstein and Hendrik, 2017), researchers have not yet addressed the topic from a sociohistorical perspective. Furthermore, little attention has thus far been paid to 'pure' food, as research has tended to centre around more well-established concepts, such as organic and fairtrade (e.g. Grankvist, Lekedal and Marmendal, 2007; Obermiller *et al.*, 2009; Kareklas, Carlson and Muehling, 2014). Thus, this paper will break new ground by exploring an underresearched area of food discourse – 'pure' food – using a unique sociohistorical approach to social semiotics.

The paper begins by outlining the methodology that is employed in this study and the data that will be analysed. It also summarises some of the previous social semiotic research to have been carried out on food discourse. Then, it introduces Great Britain as a case study and provides important contextual information on food adulteration in the nineteenth century. After, the use of 'pure' in packaging and advertising is explored chronologically, using nine examples that characterise the key meanings given to the word by advertisers. The article concludes by summarising the theoretical implications that arise from the analysis, highlighting the benefits of combining multimodal and sociohistorical approaches when exploring material artefacts.

2. Historical Background

Over the nineteenth century, the population of Britain grew from nine to forty-one million, while the number of people living in urban areas expanded from 20% to 80% (Office for National Statistics, 2015). As numbers increased, so did the pressure on food supplies. In a bid to cope with large-scale demand and the high price of imported foodstuffs, many retailers began to resort to unscrupulous practices, adulterating their foods as a way of increasing profits and gaining a competitive advantage (Collins, 1993:95). This process was facilitated by the absence of government legislation on food adulteration, as well as the relative ease with which inferior materials could be substituted for genuine articles (Dawson, 2014).

Food adulteration became a major contributor to the poor quality of life in Britain's industrial towns and cities, particularly for the working classes who were most likely to buy cheaper products (Haydu and Skotnicki, 2016:349). Adulterated foods not only contributed to such diseases as tuberculosis, scarlet fever, diphtheria, cholera, diarrhoea and dyspepsia, but many were also, in fact, poisonous (Collins, 1993:95). Borax, creosote, red tar dye, picrotixins, lead, alum, sawdust, burnt rags, earth, acorns, chicory and gum were just some of the products added to foods to make them bulkier and look more appealing (Haydu and Skotnicki, 2016:349).

The scandal of food adulteration in Britain was first exposed in 1820 by the chemist Frederick Accum. However, it was the extensive research on food and drink samples carried out by Thomas Wakley and Arthur Hassall in the 1850s that really highlighted just how widespread the practice of adulteration was. Their work led to the first parliamentary inquiry on food adulteration in 1855, which emphasised the need for legislation to protect the health of individuals and to improve trust in food retailers (Otter, 2006:521). As a result, the Adulteration of Food and Drugs Act was passed in 1860 (revised in 1872), followed by the more robust Sale of Food and Drugs Act in 1875.

The 1875 Act, which made "better provision for the sale of food and drugs in a pure and genuine condition," was considered a legislative milestone. It made the appointment of public analysts compulsory to detect food adulteration and develop reliable examination methods, and provided legislation to charge anybody who illegally adulterated food. Fifteen years after the Act's introduction, just 11.2% of products in Britain were found to be adulterated compared to 40% previously, and by 1900, all bread, tea and sugar in Britain was 'pure' (Collins, 1993:95).

One of the major consequences of the Act was the development of a code of practice in commercial relationships, with food companies now trading on their reputation for honesty, integrity and quality. Branded foods became an integral part of this code, packaged so as to offer assurance of consistent high standards from a trusted source (Lau and Lee, 1999:341). Thus, the Act was responsible for welcoming in a new era in which food packaging moved beyond its role as a protective container to become a narrative vehicle used to convey particular values, ideas and messages to consumers (Kniazeva and Belk, 2007:52).

3. Methodology and Data

Social semiotics is a theory of communication in which modes or sign systems are intertwined with their user(s) and social context of use (Jewitt, Bezemer and O'Halloran, 2016:62). It seeks to understand and identify the meaning-making resources that are available to a person in a specific context, the motivations that influence a person's selection from these choices, how these choices are organised to create meaning and the social effects that they may have (van Leeuwen 2005:3-5). Fundamental to social semiotics is the assumption that communication is ideological and always carries meanings that are bound up with issues of power and cultural distinction.

Nine examples of British 'pure' food packaging and advertising from the past 150 years have been chosen for analysis. These examples are representative of the largest food companies in Britain at the time¹ and come from a broader dataset of 100 'pure' food images that originally appeared in newspapers or as signs or trade cards. These images can be found in The Advertising Archives (a digital archive of British advertisements from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day). The collected images were grouped chronologically by decade (e.g. 1850s, 1860s, 1870s). This categorisation revealed that, whether through words or images, all examples overwhelmingly shared similar definitions of 'pure' that collectively shifted over time according to the public's concerns and interests: physical health, transparency, strength, moral purity, vegetarianism and healthy living. These chronological themes were used as an overarching narrative to explore the meaning potentials of 'pure' and how these meanings are conveyed to and accepted by consumers.

The model for analysis compiles aspects from previous social semiotic frameworks that are most important when exploring packaging and advertising (e.g. Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002; 2006; van Leeuwen, 2006; Ledin and Machin, 2018; O'Hagan, 2018c), as well as contextual information that helps to situate the examples within their sociohistorical context and to reconstruct the social practices involved in their creation.

The social semiotics element consists of four parts – Image, Typography, Colour and Materiality. 'Image' concerns Kress and van Leeuwen's three metafunctions. They specifically explore what the image is about, how it engages the viewer and how it is arranged to make sense to the viewer. 'Typography' encompasses two chief aspects: cultural connotation and style. Cultural connotation refers to the cultural references associated with the physical qualities of a typeface, while style is characterised by a type's weight, width, slope and orientation, which have vast meaning potential in terms of personalisation. 'Colour' comprises two features: value and modulation. Value is linked to the physical and emotional effect that a colour's symbolism has on viewers, while modulation considers the importance of tints and shades in terms of cultural ideologies and positive/negative valuations. 'Materiality' is divided into three components: material, printing technique and expression. While material and printing technique refer to the physical production of the advertisement/packaging,

¹ According to information provided in the Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising

expression relates to the metaphorical meaning of texture within images in terms of relief, density, regularity and consistency.

The contextual part of the model for analysis is made up of five aspects: Production Process, Participants, Topic, Purpose and Norms of Interpretation. It draws upon the work of linguistic anthropologists Hymes (1974) and Saville-Troike (2002). Production Process concerns how the advertisement/packaging was produced; Participants entails who was involved in its production; Topic considers the referential focus of the advertisement/packaging; Purpose looks at the aim of the advertisement/packaging in general and in terms of symbolic meaning; and Norms of Interpretation considers the common knowledge or shared understandings that are required to infer meaning from the advertisement/packaging.

The third part of the model concerns the archival documents that have been consulted to support analysis. These documents tend to consist of scrapbooks, press cuttings and correspondence relating to the advertising campaigns of some of the biggest food companies of the nineteenth/twentieth centuries in Britain. The British Newspapers Archive, Advertising Archive, Cadbury's Archive, Fry's Archive, National Archives, The Vegetarian Society Archive, Boys' Own Paper Archive and Girls' Own Paper Archive have been particularly useful. The Parliamentary Archive has also been consulted for specific laws and regulations concerning food adulteration. Visits to museums that specialise in food advertising, such as the Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising (London) and Oakham Treasures (Bristol), have also enabled a better understanding of their materiality and visual impact for consumers.

This models offer a complementary way in which to think about material artefacts, as social semiotics provides social history with an analytical tool to understand them, while social history reduces the subjectivity of social semiotics by providing robust empirical evidence to support arguments (O'Hagan, 2018a). This enables choices of image, typography, colour and materiality in food packaging and advertising to be embedded in archival information and historical records. In doing so, it accentuates food discourse as being anchored not only in a specific historical context, but also in specific historical norms of communication and past affordances of materials and resources (O'Hagan, 2018a). It also acknowledges that texts do not have fixed meanings and are, in fact, influenced by the agendas (whether overt or covert) of their producers. A sociohistorical approach also enables analyses to move forwards and backwards in time, thus allowing an exploration of how cultural patterns and meaning potentials can shift chronologically. Therefore, current semiotic choices in food advertising/packaging can be linked back to their early Victorian roots and mapped progressively.

4. Analysis

4.1 "The Standard of Highest Purity"

The 1875 Act made it illegal for "any person to mix, colour, stain or powder any article of food with any ingredient or material so as to render it injurious to health." As a result, food companies were keen to add the word 'pure' to their packaging to demonstrate that the product was unadulterated. While Spiekermann (2011:24) claims that the use of 'pure' on

packaging demonstrated a growing commitment of food companies towards nutrient-based thinking and consumer familiarisation with the concept of healthy eating, its sudden widespread usage also provides one of the first examples of a food buzzword and how it could be employed to sell more products. In many cases, the food was not closely associated with following a well-balanced diet (e.g. chocolate), yet it was 'pure' in the sense of being unadulterated, which people mistook for healthy.

Cadbury's became the leading figure of the 'pure' food movement, being the first food company to implement procedures to reassure consumers that their products were pure (Bradley, 2008:28). Although it was not illegal to add wholesome foodstuffs to raw foods as long as they were declared on the label, Cadbury's made the decision to purge their product range of any adulterated lines. This enabled them to advertise their products with the strapline "Absolutely Pure, therefore Best" (Byrne, 2016:70). Cadbury's also recruited sales representatives to deliver samples to doctors, which resulted in official medical endorsements by *The Lancet*, *British Medical Journal*, *The Medical Times* and Dr Lyon Playfair. They all stated that Cadbury's cocoa was 'pure' and that it was suitable as a diet for children and as the "most nutritious, digestible and restorative of drinks" (cited in Byrne, 2016:70). Following Cadbury's example, Holbrook's, Fry's and Colman's also began to seek endorsements from doctors and scientists. Purity became a competition between food companies, culminating with Mason & Co., the makers of OK sauce, offering 1000 guineas to anybody who could prove that their products were not 100% pure (Collins, 1993:108).

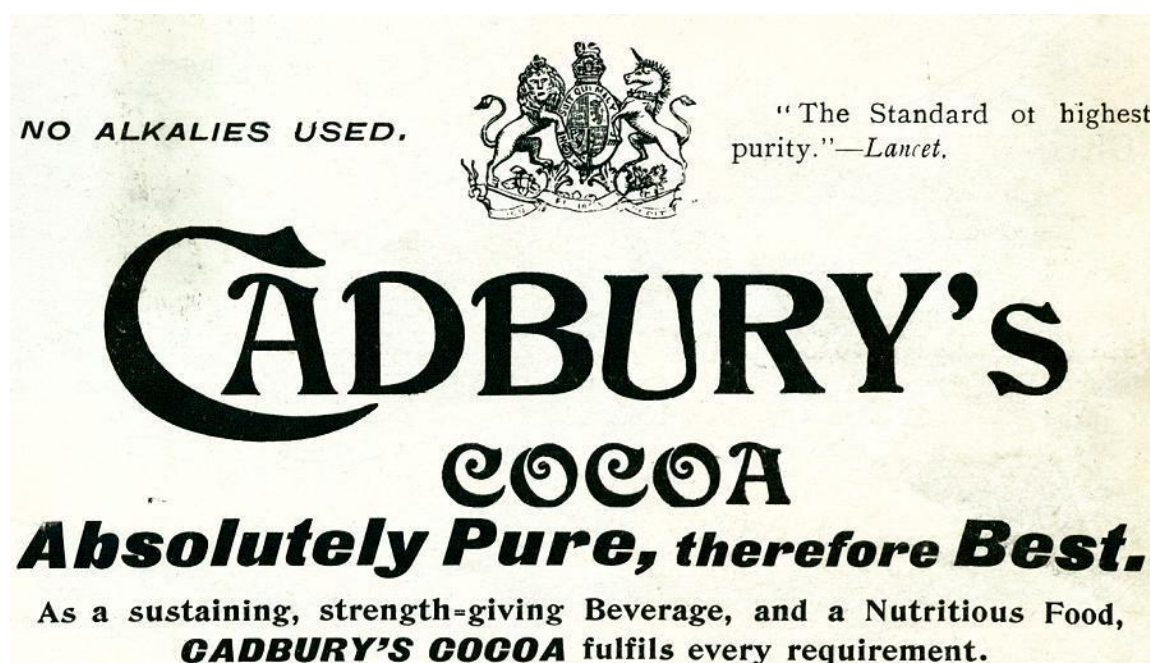


Figure 1 – Cadbury's Cocoa, "Absolutely Pure, therefore Best" (*Black and White*, 1885)

The advert in Figure 1, taken from an 1885 edition of the British periodical *Black and White*, is a characteristic example of Cadbury's advertising campaign of the late-Victorian period. It adheres to what Reinartz (2009:29) calls a "minimalist approach," supplying basic information on the product's utility and quality rather than appealing to sentiment. Similar approaches have been found in Victorian advertisements for dip pens, tea and wine (O'Hagan, 2018b). Rather than exploit the potential of images as evocative devices, the advert aims to convince consumers through its combination of statements regarding the product's purity ("no alkalies used"; "absolutely Pure, therefore Best"), a direct endorsement from *The Lancet* ("the standard of highest purity"), nutritional information and a royal seal of approval. By placing great stress on the brand's quality, Cadbury's is able to appeal to three marketing concepts which Altick (1989:184) terms "package psychology", "brand name psychology" and "snob appeal." In other words, if a customer owned several products from the manufacturer, they would want to acquire the rest; a customer who was pleased with one product would regard all items as a guarantee of excellence; and the possession of commodities, such as food, gave a person a pleasant feeling of status, no matter how humble their actual circumstances.

The use of the royal coat of arms on food packaging became commonplace in the mid-nineteenth century when Queen Victoria issued a number of royal warrants to food companies. Church (2000:636) sees the royal coat of arms as a form of "branding through association," which allowed companies to convey prestige and build their reputation. After Cadbury's was officially declared as "manufacturers of cocoa and chocolate to Queen Victoria" in 1854, the royal seal began to form a fundamental aspect of their advertising. As a recognisable symbol of the reigning monarch, the royal warrant spoke for itself: it sent a strong message that the product was of a high standard and, thus, inspired the confidence of the general public.

4.2 Transparency

The growing obsession with 'pure' food also brought about another important change in food packaging that remains a staple display of trust in modern-day society: the glass bottle. In the early nineteenth century, most liquids were stored in ceramic bottles, and when glass was used, it tended to be coloured, therefore obscuring what was inside (Twede, 2016:16). The widespread move to plain glass following the 1875 Act was for metaphorical reasons just as much as it was for health purposes. Its rigidity, odourlessness and impermeability to gases and vapours enabled products to stay fresh for a longer period of time without their taste or flavour being impaired (Risch, 2009:8090). However, more significantly, its transparency allowed customers to view the product within. This optical transparency transformed into an institutional transparency that was used by food companies to emphasise the safety and cleanliness of their products and suggest that they were purer alternatives to foods that could not be seen. The metaphorical connotations of glass remain apparent in today's food packaging and have even expanded to the use of plastic windows in cereal boxes, sandwiches, salads and nuts – all of which form part of a holistic approach to provide clarity to consumers.



Figure 2 – Crosse and Blackwell's Pure Malt Vinegar (Railway Sign, 1888)

The bottle of Crosse & Blackwell's pure malt vinegar seen in the railway sign from 1888 displayed in Figure 2 is a good example of this. The 1875 Act prompted Crosse & Blackwell to package their vinegar in white instead of dark green glass bottles. In enacting this change, the literal transparency of the bottle acted as a 'honesty device' (Ledin and Machin, 2018) or what Rowe and Slutzky (1963) term a "phenomenal transparency," which suggested that the company had nothing to hide, just like the contents that occupied the bottle. Vidler (1993) sees light, enlightenment, transparency, openness and permeability not only symbolised but also effected by glass. This is apparent in Crosse & Blackwell's vinegar bottle. As in the Cadbury's example, the link between purity and transparency is also supported by the royal coat of arms on the bottle's label, indicating that the product is endorsed by the Queen. Further seals of authenticity are provided by the company's address on the label, and the signature of Crosse & Blackwell and a statement regarding purity on the bottle's neck. This authenticity is also asserted by the earthy green and beige colour scheme, as well as the sheafs of malt, which accentuate the purity of the product in its original sense as something belonging to nature and to which nothing has been added (Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014:19).

4.3 "Strength and Staying Power"

While nutrition was predominantly concerned with healthy eating, it also had a moral motive, which was concerned with the making of 'strong' citizens and foregrounded wellbeing as a national responsibility (Ray, 2013:396). Eating 'pure' food became part of a wider discourse of imperialism, conflated with a moral duty that was owed by individuals to British society (Dyhouse, 2012:136). To neglect one's health through poor diet was deemed a "selfish and absolutely unpardonable offence" (Humphreys, 1913:54). The link between 'pure' food and a strong body was accentuated in John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*, one of the most popular conduct books of the Victorian age, as well as the *Girls' Own Journal* and *Boys' Own Journal*,

despite the fact that the scientific classification of a food as ‘pure’ had nothing to do with its strength-giving ability. Food companies, such as Midland Vinegar Company, Hovis, Colman’s Mustard, Bovril and Cadbury’s, all used packaging to advance their argument that ‘pure’ foods increased a person’s physical endurance by featuring images of factory workers, elderly people, young children and sportsmen alongside straplines on strength, fitness and stamina (Collins, 1993:108). Not only did these images propagate the notion that ‘pure’ foods were suitable for all classes and all ages, but they also stressed physical morality as an essential component of the British character, regardless of a person’s social background. A case in point is the Cadbury’s advert in Figure 3, which first appeared in the *Illustrated London News* in 1892.

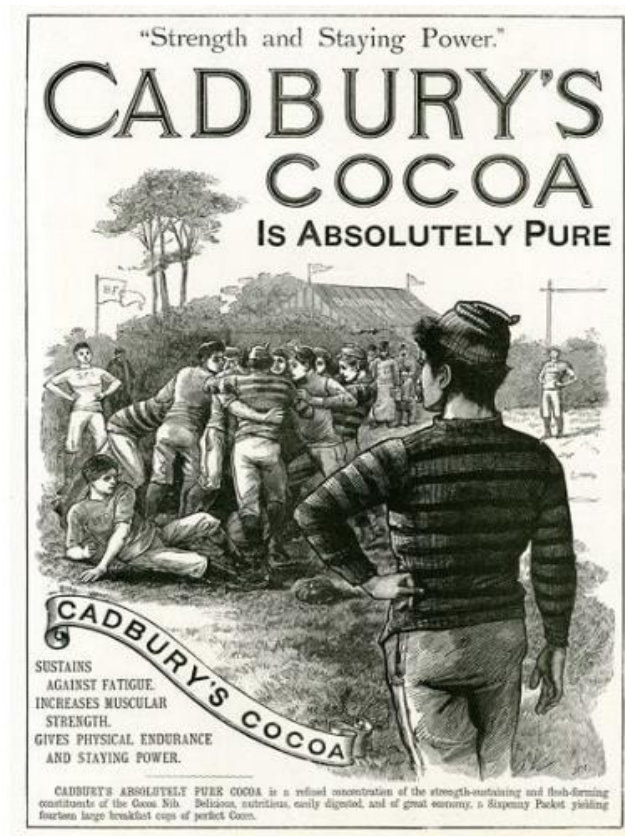


Figure 3 – Cadbury’s Cocoa, “Strength and Staying Power”, *The London Illustrated News*, 1892

With its headings and ‘cover’ image, the advert mimics a newspaper front page. By copying the format of a publication that, at that time, was held in high esteem for its honesty and integrity (Kiss, 2010), Cadbury’s is already making a statement on its high quality before the reader has even engaged with the text itself.

The focal point of the advertisement is the image of a man with his back to the viewer, looking towards a rugby scrum. Atarés (cited in Marsden, 2016) claims that when a person is portrayed with their back turned, the viewer gains a more direct relationship with the image. By embodying the scene, the desire of the protagonist thus becomes the desire of the viewer (in this case, to drink Cadbury’s cocoa). The protagonist’s hand-on-hip pose is one associated with assertive action. When we follow the object of the protagonist’s gaze towards an opponent

across the field with both hands on his hips, it seems that they are expressing a bitter rivalry associated with the match. However, when we note the figure in the background holding a cup of cocoa in his hand, the message becomes clear: nobody can stand in the way of a man and his cocoa.

A number of important visual clues are also embedded into the image that help readers to deconstruct it. First, the shed and the white flags waving in the background indicate that the people in the image belong to Bournville Football Club – an amateur rugby club established in 1883 by workers from the nearby Cadbury’s factory.² The decision to use these workers in the Cadbury’s cocoa advert is twofold: it implies that these working-class men are fit and healthy because they work for Cadbury’s *and* because they consume Cadbury products. By this means, it promotes Cadbury’s cocoa, yet also acts as a form of gratuitous advertising for Cadbury’s as a good place to work, as well as for the recently established football club.

Amongst the spectators in the background are John Cadbury himself (in a top hat and plain white tunic), holding the previously mentioned ‘elixir’ of cocoa, and his sales representative Dixon Hadaway (in a top hat and tweed coat). The fact that John Cadbury and the product remain in the background in an advertisement for Cadbury’s cocoa is interesting, as it plays down the physical item itself in favour of its supposed benefits of physical purity, as seen through the rugby match. The benefits of physical purity portrayed in the image are supported by the three written claims underneath regarding its powers to reduce fatigue, increase muscle strength and provide physical endurance. Together, they serve to promote the overall authenticity of the product.

Through its incorporation of working-class team members, a middle-class sport and upper-class magnates, the advert subtly appeals to all tiers of Britain’s class system, promoting the overall message that Cadbury’s cocoa is a product that traverses boundaries and may even foster a bond between different types of people united in their quest for purity.

4.4 “Intended by God”

The Victorian concept of food purity was also heavily tied up with spiritual purity, often in a religious sense. ‘Impure’ food was seen as a threat to personal morality, while ‘spiritually pure foods’, such as fruit and vegetables, were claimed to be “intended by God” and thus, had a positive impact on a person’s virtue (Haydu and Skotnicki, 2016:11). Middle-class temperance workers quickly adopted ‘pure’ food as part of their social reform movement, using public lectures and pamphlets to convince the working classes that ‘impure’ food corrupted a person’s moral wellbeing (Tromp, 2012:16). Food manufacturers were also eager to advocate this form of spiritual purity and did so through images of virginal women, wholesome children and the family parlour – all symbols of middle-class morality. They also used images of the monarchy to promote purity in the sense of pureblood and lineage. In doing so, food

² Until the end of the nineteenth century, rugby was known as ‘rugby football’; therefore, many ‘football clubs’ of the period are, in fact, what we understand as rugby union clubs today. Here, the men’s clothing, their huddled position and the goal posts all indicate that they are playing rugby.

companies implied that to use their product would result in a fundamental change to one's own pedigree and status.

A good example of the association between children and spiritual purity can be seen in the promotional trade card in Figure 4, released by Fry's in 1895 to advertise their pure concentrated cocoa. Throughout the Victorian era, trade cards were widely used by companies to promote their products. Cards were given out to passers-by on the streets, at the factory gates or even inserted into product packaging as a consumer keepsake. Capitalising on the Victorian obsession with the sanctity of childhood and a sentimentalised vision of innocence, many food companies placed images of children at the centre of their advertising campaigns.



Figure 4 – Fry's Cocoa, "It is the drink par excellence for children," Trade Card, 1895

In the above advert, three androgynous children peep out from behind a curtain, with only the hint of colour on their shirts suggesting their gender. Higonnet (1998:23-24) notes that the Victorian child was often portrayed with no gender in order to preserve their social, sexual and psychic innocence. A halo of golden light shines above each of the children's heads, granting them a cherub-like quality associated with purity. This is emphasised by their rosy cheeks and smiles, as well as the central position of the word 'pure' under the child who appears to look the fairest and most angelic. Vänskä (2017:24) states that children were often depicted as cherubs in order to portray them as especially close to God. In this way, they were placed on a pedestal to be indulged in the belief that their innocence would restore the moral

wellbeing of adults and society as a whole. According to Knight (1999:413), this portrayal of children makes no demands upon the viewer and requires no struggle; instead, it provokes only a narrow range of feelings, namely that of wonder and adoration. Consequently, consumers are convinced to purchase a product through subtle rather than overt appeals that play up the children’s naivety, as seen in this example through the head canting of child two and the direct eye contact of child three.

The quote “it is the drink par excellence for children” appears above the central image in the advertisement. This statement was first made by Dr W.H.R. Stanley following the 1875 Act and continued to be used thereafter by Fry’s to promote their cocoa. When interpreting the words and image together, it becomes clear that the advert exploits the use of what French (2017:459) calls a “human story” (i.e., real-life figures to which consumers can relate) through which to dramatise the scientific evidence about cocoa. This fits with Kniazeva and Belk’s (2007:52) view that consumers “do not choose brands, they choose lives.” By showing an idealised model of middle-class children alongside a medical endorsement, Fry’s is setting a standard that equates its product with being physically healthy and spiritually pure. As a result, it suggests that consumers will obtain physical and mental health (like these children) if they drink Fry’s cocoa.

4.5 “Absolute Purity and Wholesomeness”

Another symbol of moral purity throughout the Victorian era was the woman. The unblemished and chaste woman, devoted to traditional, domestic duties, and her children, was held up as a role model for all other girls. This was an image that food advertisers were quick to appropriate for their own campaigns. Heinz was one of the leading companies to connect purity with femininity, as seen in their 1906 advertisement from *The Times* in Figure 5.



Figure 5 – Heinz, “The Name that Guarantees Pure Vinegar”, *The Times*, 1906

Although Heinz was an American company, its products were sold throughout Britain from 1886. By the early twentieth century, it had established offices and factories in London (Skrabec, 2009:137). Heinz was one of the first food companies to use a physical person rather than an illustration to embody their concept of purity. In 1903, they employed Margaret Macleod, known as “the girl in the white cap,” to travel around the world and demonstrate Heinz products in store. Her photograph appears in all Heinz adverts from the period. Dressed in white – a recognised symbol of purity, decency and sexual probity – Macleod embodied Heinz’s claim to ‘pure’ food and epitomised purity in its physical and moral sense (Domosh, 2003:8).

In her white cap and smock (Figure 5), Macleod looks as if she has stepped directly from the kitchen. While her image entails a performance of the rituals of a middle-class housewife, the fact that Heinz predominantly recruited women in its factories means that she is simultaneously able to represent the working-class factory girl. In blending these two roles, Heinz is able to imply that their factory-made products are just as pure as those made in the comfort of one’s own home. In addition to its association with purity, whiteness also has a long correlation with cleanliness and safety. McClintock (1995:211) claims that white indicated that a person had withstood “the fetid effluvia of the slums, the belching smoke of industry, social agitation, economic upheaval and restored the imperial body politic and the race.” In other words, consumers of Heinz products could be ensured that their ‘pure’ food was not only nutritious and natural, but also safe.

Like the child in the Fry’s image, Macleod has her head slightly tilted to the left and faces towards the viewer. However, this time, the bottle of Heinz pure malt vinegar in her hand and her outward facing foot suggest an act of “offer” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006:127) that entices viewers to try the product. This is accentuated by the foregrounded and enlarged photograph of the vinegar bottle. Juxtaposing the two images and making them the same size encourages the viewer to find a link between them: in this case, the colour of Macleod’s clothing (white) and the material of the bottle (glass) as recognised symbols of purity. In the image of Macleod, the lengthy paragraphs of texts alongside that praise the “absolute purity and wholesomeness” of the vinegar are summarised. The double entendre of “the finest of its class” is also reflected in Macleod’s appearance, which appeals to the middle-class notion of purity. The caption underneath the image, which states that “the girl in the white cap” will send customers a booklet about vinegar rather than the company itself, humanises Heinz. Consequently, it fosters a positive interpersonal relationship between the consumer and the company, thus strengthening the brand connection in the consumer’s mind).

4.6 “The Natural Way of Life”

As Britain entered the twentieth century and the problem with food adulteration decreased dramatically, food companies began to realise that ‘pure’ was no longer a major selling point for consumers (Bradley, 2008:28). In response, they started a remarketing campaign of the word, associating it with the growing wave of vegetarianism in the country. Suddenly, refraining from meat-eating became romanticised as something pure, signifying an alimentary route back to nature (Ray, 2013:404). ‘Pure’ food began to be propagated as an essential part

of the “natural way of life” that could remove consumers from the dulling effects of industrial capitalism (Richardson, 2018). Ironically, it was the middle classes who were most taken in by what they considered to be a new and trendy movement. The working classes had been largely vegetarian for centuries out of financial necessity more so than any other factor (Gregory, 2007:43). Many of these middle-class vegetarians tended to be women who were associated with the growing New Woman movement, which was bestowing them with a new gender identity, characterised by radical free-thinking and sexual liberation (O’Hagan, 2018c:14). The food industry began to use these ‘new women’ as mascots of vegetarianism, as exemplified by the 1910 trade card for Queen of the May pure vegetable chewing gum in Figure 6 (now held in the National Archives).



Figure 6 – Queen of the May, pure vegetable chewing gum, Trade Card, 1910

For centuries, chewing gum had been considered for men only and was deemed “beneath the dignity of all well-bred women” (Fiegl, 2009). In a bid to glamorise chewing gum and give it a new image associated with the ‘pure’ food movement, many Edwardian food companies created ‘pure vegetable’ chewing gum, using images of women on their packaging to recharacterise it as a female food. The chosen images were strongly linked to the Art Nouveau tradition, which reconceptualised women as feminine, carefree and sexually alluring in a bid to return to the simplicity and beauty of earlier times (Thompson, 2014:158). Other features of Art Nouveau also began to form central aspects of the packaging, such as ornate scrolls, sinuous lines, decorative lettering and temperate colours. All of these characteristics are apparent in Figure 6, which, together, aim to convey a modern image that stands against many of the messages portrayed in Victorian concepts of purity.

Here, purity loses its connotations of innocence and docility and, instead, acquires a connection with the more secular purity and high-mindedness of the New Woman’s public goals. The woman on the packaging stands in direct contrast to the Heinz’s “girl in the white cap” with her pompadour hairstyle, slender neck and pink low-cut dress. These features personify her as a ‘Gibson Girl’ – the Edwardian feminine ideal of physical attractiveness, as portrayed by the pen-and-ink illustrations of artist Charles Dana Gibson. The Gibson Girl was typically middle-class, well-educated and athletic. While she sought a degree of independence, she did not seek it in ‘unconventional’ ways like the suffragettes. Patterson (2005:173) claims that this made her a suitable image for advertisers, as she promoted

progressive values, yet did not usurp the traditional roles of women. This balance is played up in the name of the product: Queen of the May. The May Queen was the pagan goddess of spring and is a recognised symbol of purity, strength and fertility. By blending her traditional image with that of the Gibson Girl and Art Nouveau conceptions of the woman, the chewing gum company seeks not just to sell a product, but also a lifestyle. According to Groth (2006:10), this lifestyle – that of the modern pure woman within the confines of traditional purity – is a reflection of the new world of the early twentieth century, yet also conspicuously helps to shape it. This is emphasised by the supporting text, which states that the gum is “for athletes and cyclists” (the bike being the symbol of the New Woman movement) and contains “jokes, songs, puns, tricks” (typically masculine activities), while also being “perfumed with choice flavors” (a highly feminised semantic prosody).

Overall, this advert serves to link together a number of seemingly unrelated concepts – purity, vegetarianism and the New Woman – in order to sell chewing gum to a new audience. Having proved successful, food companies began to realise that remarketing a concept once consumers became apathetic to its meaning was a canny way to continue to sell products. This remarketing has remained a core aspect of the food advertising industry ever since.

4.7 “Just as Pure, Just as Simple”

By the outbreak of World War One in 1914, the heyday of the ‘pure’ food movement had come to an end. This was largely the result of increased legislation that had almost completely eradicated illegal food adulteration in Britain, as well as a decrease in the trendy perception of vegetarianism and waning religious influence on issues of morality (Collins, 1993:109; Gregory, 2007:19; O’Hagan, 2019:91). Throughout the twentieth century, further legislation was passed that consolidated the 1875 Act and cracked down on false labelling, misleading advertising and unauthorised product claims and royal warrants (Dawson, 2014). As a result, for much of the twentieth century, ‘pure’ did not play a major role in advertising, losing its place to other growing buzzwords like ‘homemade’, ‘traditional’ and ‘fresh’. In the few instances when ‘pure’ formed a central part of a food company’s advertising, it tended to be stripped back to basics, reinstating the original meaning of the word as a single ingredient product – something which had somehow got lost amongst the consumerism of the Victorian age. This can be seen in the adverts from 1910, 1952 and 1976 in Figure 7 (from railway signs and *Woman’s Weekly*, respectively), all of which share the common theme of purity as a food coming directly from its original source. Surprisingly, this concept of ‘pure’ had seldom been emphasised before by companies who had tended to place a greater emphasis, first, on the safety of their products and, later, on the metaphorical connotations of purity.

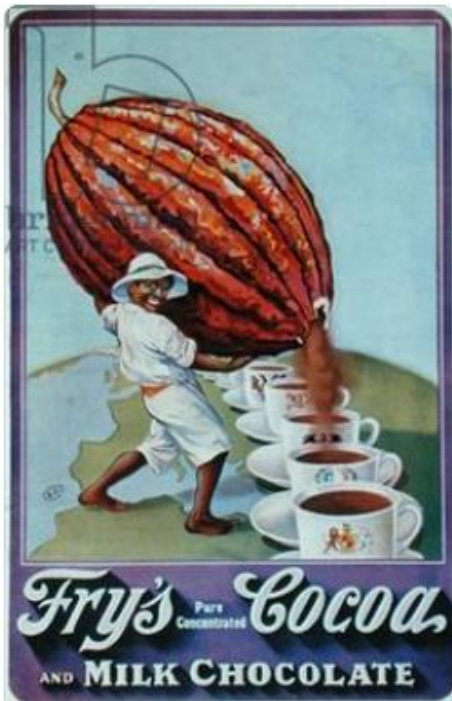


Figure 7 – The Evolution of Pure Food (from left to right: Fry's (Railway Sign, 1910), Rowntree's (Railway Sign, 1952), Britvic, *Woman's Weekly*, 1976)

In all three examples above, the product itself forms the principal element of the advertisement. Fry's show the smiling face of a young barefooted cocoa plantation worker pouring an oversized cocoa bean directly into a cup bearing the royal coat of arms. While the worker retains the white clothes associated with the moral purity of the early twentieth century, he also transfers the conventional meaning of purity, as asserted in the 1875 Act, through his position on top of the 'remote' and 'exotic' Africa and his direct gaze at the viewer, both conveying authenticity and integrity (Varul, 2008:661). Ramamurthy (2012:369) claims that, in the early twentieth century, food companies used such images to romanticise labour and present a sense of honesty. In showing a happy, smiling worker, they were able to signal worker empowerment, thus creating a positive relationship between the worker and the consumer, much in the same way as fairtrade products today (Bryant and Goodman, 2004:359).

This style of advertising, which weaves together the purity of the worker with the product, appears to have fallen out of use during and in the aftermath of World War Two. Possible reasons for this include rationing and food shortages, which resulted in the reemergence of illegal food adulteration, and increased mistrust of other nations (Phillips and French, 1998:350). Consequently, the original producer or worker became removed from advertisements, resulting in an almost mystical and telekinetic pouring of the source into the final product. In the Rowntree's example, a bowl of fruit is tipped into a cardboard packet, suggesting that the resulting sweets are composed entirely of fruit. The implication that they are real fruit flavours provided a visual way of circumventing false written claims in advertising, as asserted by the Labelling of Food Order 1944. Interestingly, in this example, the worker is replaced by the consumer – here, a happy, cheeky boy with his mouth stuffed with sweets – indicating the end result of purity (i.e., a healthy child) rather than its origins (i.e., a genuine unadulterated product). Just as the Fry's child dressed in white remains entangled

with the concept of moral purity, so the Rowntree's child cannot fully detach himself from the association between purity and physical wellbeing, even within these new twentieth-century constructs.

Following more robust legislation introduced in 1968 under the Trade Descriptions Act, the definition of false advertising was extended to include images, not just text. This meant that any advertisers promoting 'pure' products could not unjustly equate them with 'healthy'. In order to comply with this regulation, many food companies began to reinsert blocks of text into their advertisements – a practice which had largely disappeared at the end of the nineteenth century – in order to support the claims transmitted through their images. The Britvic example draws upon the visual similarities between pineapples/oranges and teapots to present a blended image, which indicates that the fruit juice comes directly from the source. Using the teapot, a long-established symbol of comfort and reassurance in Britain, Britvic is able to gain the consumer's trust in the purity of their products. Although the supporting text largely confirms the message of the image, Britvic also states that there is "a little added sugar" (the quantifier being used as a hedging device), so as to avoid being accused of false advertising. Nonetheless, studies have found that, as humans, we are wired to notice, process and remember visuals over text (Liu *et al.*, 2009). This means that, despite Britvic being legally compliant and unaccountable for consumers' responses, most consumers are likely to read the advertisement incorrectly as 'Britvic fruit juice is 100% pure.'

5. Conclusion

Since the 1875 Sale of Food and Drugs Act, food companies have exploited consumer concerns by using purity as a rhetorical device to sell their products. By constructing a particular discourse that equates the purity of a food product with a physical, mental or spiritual type of purity, food has become invested with a moral authority and legitimacy that entices consumers to buy into the lifestyle and cultural value that the product promises, although it may not be actually accurate. Paavola (2001:244) notes that persistent media attention on global warming and climate change in recent years has led modern-day consumers to associate food purity with its environmental and ethical impacts. This is supported by research by De Boer, Hoogland and Boersema (2007:987) and a 2015 study by Tetra Pak who found that consumers now feel it is their moral duty to care for nature. Consequently, while some may continue to choose products out of cost or habit, others are increasingly likely to buy foods based on a company's environmental reputation. Acting in response to the growth of the 'conscious consumer', food companies have begun to build upon previous notions of purity, adding new layers that develop the moral flawlessness of Christian thinking into a more Eastern meditative connotation that is aligned with political morality, personal autonomy and self-fulfilment (Goodman, 2004; Sassatelli, 2004). This is emphasised by the use of packaging in green hues with images of trees and plants that discursively valorises eco-consumption and exploits consumer sensitivity towards the environment. Rather than replace old interpretations of purity, the concept is sedimented upon them, becoming enriched in meaning and thus emphasising how its power continues to lie in its multifaceted nature, which is played up by food companies for the ultimate goal of profit.

Another key implication of this study has been the importance of adopting a sociohistorical perspective to social semiotics. This has enabled social semiotics to move beyond a text-centred focus by anchoring analyses in archival evidence and triangulating them with a historical awareness of institutions and social structures. Bringing social history and social semiotics together has provided a way of uncovering socioculturally induced meanings and functions specific to a particular period in a particular country, whether that be in terms of nationalism, religious beliefs or the New Woman movement, and exploring how these meaning potentials can shift over time. Understanding these traditions has also foregrounded the significance of three factors when carrying out analysis: an awareness of unspoken historical rules, a recognition of the boundaries of social acceptability and the constraints and possibilities of the meaning resources available. It has also enabled a greater understanding of the communicative roles that institutions play in influencing and dictating semiotic choices, particularly in terms of how purity can be used as performative device. This makes it clear that food can never be understood solely in terms of nutritional value; instead, it must be viewed within the notions of power and ideology. Thus, a sociohistorical approach offers a new way to carry out social semiotic analysis, particularly when dealing with historical artefacts. Locating semiotic choices within the cultural codes of a particular society achieves more in-depth and less subjective analyses that go beyond the insights offered by social semiotics alone.

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