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## **When Magazine Editorial and Advertising Are in Conflict: Depictions of Christmas in Women'S Magazines**

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How do you deliver a magical Christmas to one and all? In this paper we use a social semiotic and allegorical analysis of women's magazines in both Australia and the UK over twenty-five years to consider their role in shaping consumer perceptions of the Christmas food rituals. In doing so we identify a multiplicity of challenges for the cook: practical, social and emotional.

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## When Magazine Editorial and Advertising are in Conflict: Depictions of Christmas in Women's Magazines

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### ABSTRACT

In common with other predominantly Christian countries in the UK and Australia the most important religious festival is also each country's dominant consumption ritual (Belk 1990, 1989, Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; Holbrook and Hirshman 1982). The media report retail sales in the 'run up' to Christmas as an index of the health of the economy (Beck 2010). Many researchers have examined consumer consumption from the perspective of advertising and its role in shaping ritual behavior (Otnes and Scott 1998 Hummon 1988; McCracken 1990; Sherry 1987). Such rituals may be viewed as transmitters of cultural values, providing the tools and techniques for social behavior (McCracken 1990). In this paper we report the findings of a longitudinal social semiotic and allegorical analysis of food features and advertisements in women's magazines in both Australia and the United Kingdom.

We draw upon social semiotics for our analysis because it foregrounds how multimodal texts such as magazines can be the site of conflicting social discourses (Kress 2009). A fundamental premise of this approach is that 'meaning arises in social environments and social interactions' (Kress 2009 p54). Our focus on the Christmas editions leads us to consider the role of editorial content in shaping consumer perceptions of the Christmas rituals and to identify some potential conflicts of interest between the advertisers and the feature writers.

The institutions who do most to maintain the Christmas consumption ritual are the grocery chains and department stores who start it each year by, sending out hamper catalogues, setting up specialist departments for trees, decorations and specialist foods, frequently months in advance. This activity is supported by the media, particularly magazines aimed at a female audience, such as the Australian Women's Weekly and the UK's Good Housekeeping - both magazines have the widest readership amongst the female home maker sector in their respective countries (Audit Bureau of Circulation 2010, National Readership Survey 2010). Holthus (2009, 491) talks of women's magazines as being "socialization agents that construct normative family relationships". In contrast to similar magazines that supply recipes for

Christmas food, these two magazines specifically address the reader and provide editorial guidance on how to complete all the tasks. In this vein, these magazines promote - some would say 'preach' - to their female audience the importance of the Christmas ritual.

In this ritual, food is promoted as being of major importance. Food is the centerpiece, the focus of adherence to the prescribed Christmas rituals. Many of the editorial features and the advertisements promote a nostalgic view of the festivities with images of an extended family around a heavily laden Christmas table being projected as 'the heart of the domestic ritual' (Di Leonardo 1987). Failure to adhere to the ritual comes at a price. It is the cook's responsibility to serve a 'proper' Christmas 'menu' to their family in the seasonally-decorated home, on Christmas Day.

Our research has used archival material from the UK and Australia to reveal that underneath this social education lies a different story. The magazines' collaboration in the Christmas ritual has another function, which is to tell an allegorical tale of right and wrong (Rook 1984). Whilst the magazines' message appears to support the retail aspect of this ritual, offering instructions for each generation on to how to behave at Christmas, our research suggests that there is some discontinuity. The editorial subtext does not appear to necessarily support the messages contained within the advertisements. That there is the potential for conflict between the editorial board and their various stakeholders has been commented on previously (Gough-Yates, 2003). This paper considers the implications of this discontinuity for the consumer.

We initially conducted a structured synchronic and diachronic semiotic analysis of the main Christmas features in the November, December and January editions of the British editions of Good Housekeeping and Good Food and the Australian Woman's Weekly between 1985 and 2011. The structure of the narrative told by the magazines rewards behavior that reflects the cultural values of endurance and sacrifice to family. This contrasts with 'busy' mums who are 'on a budget' who fail to achieve this cultural endorsement because they haven't tried

hard enough. Their skill level or budget isn't viewed as the barrier to presenting their family with the true Christmas it is their mind set, an unwillingness to fully participate in the rituals. Following Arnould and Thompson (2005), we are not suggesting that readers blindly do what magazines tell them. We are in fact suggesting that the magazine as a whole engages its readers in at least two conflicting discourses. How each reader resolves the inherent tension between these discourses comes about partly because of the resources used by the magazine to represent these discourses, and partly through the cultural competence of the reader. (Kress, 2009)

Each year the story is the same. The magazines present the cook (usually a woman) with a range of Christmas 'menus' to choose from. Overtly, readers have a choice as to which version of the Christmas meal they wish to make. In Australia the usual choice is between a plentiful 'traditional' or 'classic' menu featuring roast turkey, pork or ham and lots of dessert; or a seafood or BBQ meal outdoors or a 'budget' version. In the UK the choice is between the labor-intensive traditional turkey-centric meal ending with a Christmas pudding or either a budget or time/labor saving alternative.

Each magazine presents the traditional menu in its full 'regalia', its cultural dress. The table is usually cluttered with baubles and tinsel and other commercial Christmas symbols, which have no functionality. There is richness in the colors and textures of the images accompanying the text, a visual rhetoric, which takes the reader beyond the presentation of food to the delivery of Christmas itself (Scott 1994). The text describes the role of a largely invisible cook in mythical terms. She is given a series of challenges to overcome. The success of the day is dependent on the commitment of the cook to overcome not avoid these challenges. Her commitment and endurance are out of the ordinary – some magazines instruct the cooks to get out of bed at 6am on Christmas morning to start cooking lunch. If the cook is triumphant - or at the very least adheres to the heroic path - her reward is the possibility of delivering a "Magical Christmas". The texts tell us that children deserve a "magical" Christmas - while for others the gift is the ability to tap into a "nostalgic" vision of Christmas.

The narrative technique of allegory is a powerful way to analyze and understand how the magazines play their role in this cultural ritual. "Allegory text is shaped by conformance

to a traditional set of connections, they arouse expectations and gratification" in this case in the reader (Booth 1974, 71). Allegories always show two sides to a story. There is always a hero and always one or more villains or monsters. The hero personifies good cultural values; the monsters personify the sins (Stern 1988). While the monsters may be depicted as physical competitors, they often represent the temptations to which the hero must not succumb. The hero is presented with a choice, if the wrong choice is made the outcome is exclusion or some other form of censure (Stern 1988).

Below the surface story of festive choice and plenty, the two magazines tell an allegory – a moral tale of sacrifice, endurance and commitment to domestic life. The invisible cook is the hero who overcomes the challenges. Her reward for resisting the temptation to save time or effort is the magical symbolic table of plenty. For those who choose the alternative path the rewards if any are few. Our analysis shows that over three decades in magazines in both countries, commercial 'magical' Christmas symbolism was absent from the alternative menus. In contrast with the editorial content, many of the advertisers are offering inducements in the shape of saving time and effort to entice the cook to take the socially less desirable path

What is the reader to do? Should she engage in the ritual promoted by the editorial or try the easier version? Or should she buy the advertised products? Or some kind of mixture of both – perhaps making the special Christmas dessert, but serving a bought, ready-cooked turkey. How does she deal with the emotional conflict between engagement with the magazine, her own ideas about what Christmas should be, and her role as maintainer of tradition and family values, and family budget? It is this apparent conflict that provides the focus of the paper.

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