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Reading food marketing: the semiotics of Marks & Spencer!?

Richard Tresidder

Sheffield Business School, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to introduce a social semiotic methodology for the analysis of food marketing and to explore the complexity of reading representations of food within promotional texts. **Design/methodology/approach** – The work develops a social semiotic reading of Marks & Spencer's promotional campaigns utilising images from television and web-based campaigns. This reading is located within a conceptual framework that underpins and identifies the influences that direct the interpretation process and subsequent consumption patterns of the reader/consumer.

Findings – By analysing the relationship between food marketing and the consumer, it is possible to identify a language of food that has its meaning and significance embedded within both culture and society. It is argued that the individual hermeneutically interprets and negotiates this semiotic language of food to reach their individual understanding of food advertising.

Research limitations/implications – The conceptual model presented within this paper offers a subjective and interpretivistic approach to the analysis of food marketing. As such it is open to criticism that its implications are limited as it lacks a positivistic or empirical grounding. However, the implications for such an approach are that it highlights that marketing is about people and, if industry is to develop effective or efficient forms of marketing, it is important to understand how the meaning and significance of products such as food are embedded within both culture and society, and how this informs the individual's relationship with it.

Originality/value – Although the study of food has a significant and substantial archive, research within food marketing focuses primarily on management and strategy and fails to engage with the social discourses that define meaning. As such, this paper offers an original insight into food marketing.

Keywords Consumer behaviour, Sales campaigns, Food products, Marketing, Advertising

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

This paper attempts to provide an understanding of how the food retail industry comes to utilise a set of signs and images within its marketing strategies that reflect the nature and experience of food consumption for the consumer. Although there has been a great deal of research that examines the relationship between food advertising and consumer behaviour (Johns and Pine, 2002; Kelly *et al.*, 2008; Hawkes, 2009), there has been little undertaken into how the consumer interprets food marketing campaigns or the semiotic codes that are utilised within these. As a consequence, this paper also considers how the consumer reads marketing texts/advertisements and gains meaning and direction from the process. It is hoped that this type of research will enable the industry to understand how the representations of food are interpreted by consumers and how a symbolic relationship is constructed with the customer. In order to achieve this, the paper applies a semiotic model or method (see Figure 1) that explores the interpretation process, and the conceptual framework in which the experience of food is located.

To illustrate the production and consumption process the paper presents a social semiotic reading of the images utilised within food campaigns by Marks & Spencer (M&S)[1]. M&S utilise a style that defines the brand and values of the group, and in order to elevate the definition and significance of their food within the market, they adopt a modern approach to food marketing that utilises a set of semiotic codes to reinforce and add symbolic value to their products. Although M&S is the focus of this



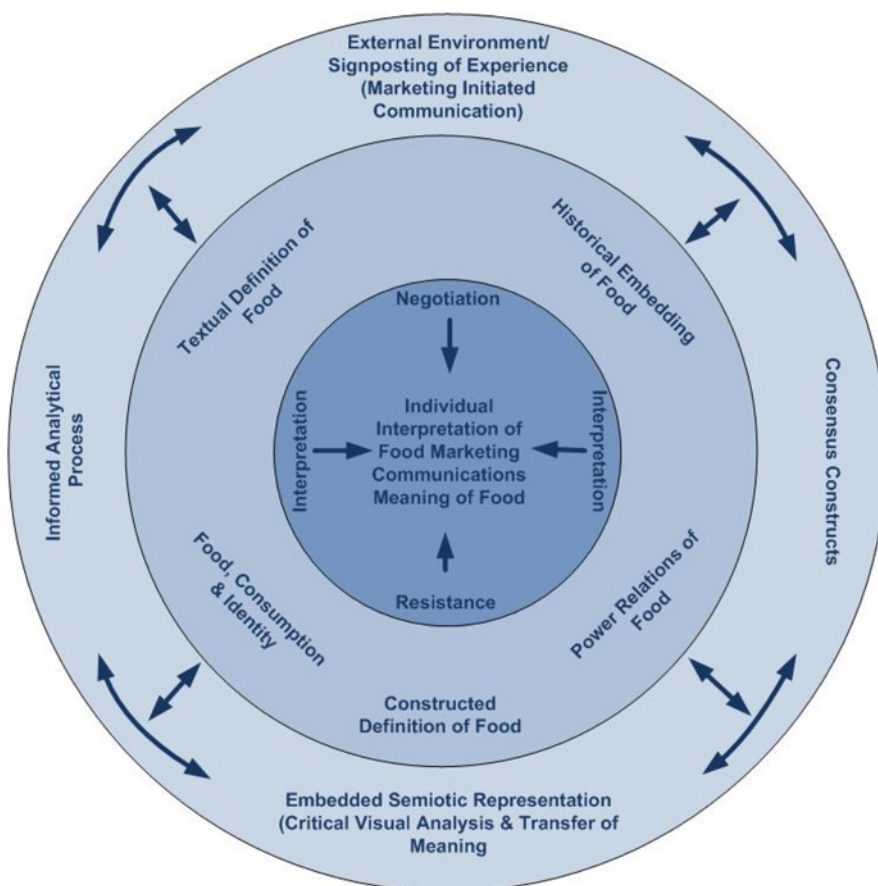


Figure 1.
Charting the semiotic
interpretation process of
Marks & Spencer food
campaigns

paper, the semiotic codes they utilise is constructed from a set of transferable marketing conventions. These conventions form a language of food that underpins contemporary food marketing, and as such this paper does not attempt to provide a critique of M&S commercial practices, but rather uses M&S as a case study to illustrate the semiotic language of food. In order to account for the reflexivity of the reader/consumer (as interactive participant) within the interpretation process, the approach presented in Figure 1 adopts a hermeneutic epistemology as this recognises the significance of the individual reflexive element within the interpretation process. This approach recognises that there will be various interpretations of the M&S's campaign according to the individual's knowledge and experience. Additionally the model adapts Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1996, 2001) social semiotic approach as its key structural influence. The method consists of three layers of meaning and analysis (see Figure 1), and the significance of these layers are as follows:

- (1) *Layer 1: Marketing initiated communications.* The outside layer of the model in Figure 1 identifies how the external factors of marketing process (the campaign, social and cultural pressures, segmentation, demographics, consensus constructs) transmit a semiotic language or discourse of food. The

analysis of these aspects identify how the reader is influenced by the social, cultural and ideological embedding of food and M&S within contemporary marketing practices, and the messages being generated and transmitted by marketing campaigns. These practices although informed by external factors, also draw their semiotic codes from the discourse or language of food that is identified in layer two of the model.

- (2) *Layer 2: The discourse of food.* Layer two identifies the various social and cultural discourses of food; these discourses inform the content and structure of marketed initiated communication, and the individual's interpretation of food marketing. The discourse or language of food is socially and culturally constructed by weaving together the historical significance of food, how food is represented in television programmes, cook books, food writing, etc., how the identified society or culture embraces food as a material representation of it, how food is used to define identity and how food is reflected within the power relations of that society. This section defines and embeds the language of food and directly informs layers one and three.
- (3) *Layer 3: In search of truth.* Layer 3 represents how the individual interprets, resists and negotiates the messages being generated in layers one and two to create their own understanding and acceptance of food marketing campaigns. As an "interactive participant" (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001) the reader negotiates the first and second layers of significance of food marketing by recognising marketing practices, their significance and the semiotic embedded definitions of food within them. However, the interpretation of the materials is tempered by their own cognitive reflexivity and their social, cultural and experiential knowledge and experiences. There are elements of the marketing message that is accepted, but the individual's relationship to the other layers in the model is a subjective process that will lead to multiple readings and interpretations of marketing texts. As such, this layer reflects where the reader/consumer or "interactive participant" (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001) negotiates these semiotic expressions and definitions of the language of food to create their own understanding of the consumption experience or "intimate frontier" (Dawkins, 2009) of food.

M&S food marketing draws on what may be defined as the semiotic language of food, it utilises "... the semiotics of the senses" (Dawkins, 2009, p. 34), it enables the reader to enter into the realm of food as entertainment, escape and the aesthetic (Williams, 2006). The food industry uses a set of semiotic codes that are part of the semiotics of food (Brunori, 2007), these codes are reinforced by the ritualistic nature of food production and service, it is this ritualistic element that elevates M&S's visual representations to that of the extraordinary (see Figure 5). Images of food utilised by M&S (see Figures 2 to 5) represent the iconic (Claseen, 2007) or mythical (see Magee, 2007) embedding of food within contemporary society, this myth defines food as a refuge or experience that acts as a counterbalance to the world of fast food and the uncertainty of post-modern society (Delind, 2006). The food industry through various marketing initiatives adopts these codes or language to create a semiotic liminal consumption space, in which we are released from our normal social constraints; the images used by M&S offer a representation of food that is removed from our normal experiences. The use of natural or authentic representations (see Figure 3) invites us as "interactive participants" to vicariously find escape or even social therapy through the semiotic consumption of the site by offering an authentic experience of food. This is reinforced in Figure 3 by the



Figure 2.
The Italian range



Figure 3.
The authentic

food being placed on a rough wooden platter on a distressed wooden table; it connotes the authentic, original or organic.

The social semiotic interpretation of M&S's food marketing involves the negotiation of the embedded signs and images contained on the page; however, in order for the semiotic interpretation to be charted, it is important to identify the embedded definitions of the images and codes used on the page, or in other words the



Figure 4.
Food as art



Figure 5.
Finding the extraordinary
in the ordinary

“represented participant” and the phenomenon of food within the advertisement. This is constructed through a complex discourse that uses recognised codes and forms of language of dining and food that is embedded within contemporary society. In order to discover some form of hermeneutic truth of food for the reader/consumer within the interpretation process, the reader/consumer as “interactive participant” negotiates the embedded social and cultural positioning of food as seen within M&S’s campaigns. The individual has to negotiate the definition of space/place and the underlying historical embedding of the “represented participant” with the socio-cultural understanding of food and the power relations shape the semiotic production and consumption of the advertisement. Critically, this is underpinned by the precept that the individual negotiates the hermeneutic self in resisting and interpreting the M&S images.

The characterisation and subsequent semiotic interpretation of images of food is guided by the historical, social and culturally embedded definitions of food as a cultural activity is manifested in a particular semiotic language. Food plays a significant social and cultural role, and its historical significance is well charted (Artbury, 2005; O’Connor, 2005; O’Gorman, 2007); this is reinforced by the role of food within religious rituals (Sered, 1988; Hely, 2002; Marshall, 2005). Food also acts as a marker of who we are, where we come from and where we wish to go (Howes, 2004; Delind, 2006; Ruben and Shelton, 2008; Dawkins, 2009), and we think of consuming it as a sensual and luxurious exercise (Reed-Danahay, 1996; van der Veen, 2003; Howes, 2004; Magee, 2007; Dawkins, 2009). This language of food and gastronomy may be seen as an ideological construct (Ferguson, 1998; Ruben and Shelton, 2008) that is perpetuated by the representations of food in films (Ferry, 2003), art, literature (Hollander, 1999), television, contemporary cultural movements (Ferguson, 1998; Magee, 2007; Ruben and Shelton, 2008) and advertising. It is from these embedded definitions, codes and semiotic language that M&S draw their inspiration and marketing themes.

M&S marketing as sign vehicle

The context of the interpretation is guided by the nature of the sign vehicle (marketing texts, websites and television) as this not only carries the signs and images of food but also sets the context, value and direction of the interpretation process (Marshall, 2005). For the purposes of this paper the promotional activities are contextualised by the embedded definitions of M&S in the market place, the brand comes to represent quality (Blois, 2003), trustworthiness and responsible sourcing (Jones *et al.*, 2005), luxury and the significance of its iconic status within the retail sector (Burt and Sparks, 2002), this directs and contextualises the interpretation and symbolic consumption of the brand (Proctor and Kitchen, 2002). In terms of food this is embedded and reinforced by the “This is not just food, this is M&S food”, slogan that is used within its television and text marketing campaigns (see Figure 2). This develops a relationship with the consumer by framing the food and marking it as “different”, and provides a context in which the interpretation process occurs. As such, M&S’s food marketing is understood in the context (recognised function) of marketing, the significance of this is that it connotes and contextualises the interpretation process within the language of food and gastronomy. The construction of the major campaigns such as the 2010 “Italian Range” promotion[2] (Figure 2) consists of two elements, the first is the dominant images of the raw ingredients such as the cheese and rice; and the second is the empty but culturally rich kitchen, these images of the preparation of what is a “ready meal” are accompanied by a gentle soundtrack of music and a voiceover that reminds us that it is authentic and “not just food”. This is significant as the voiceover directs the interpretations process; it

contextualises and places the advertisement within a sensual and significant experience whereby the meaning is elevated; it enables a relationship to be built with the consumer. The second element links experience/consumption (the sacred) and the practical/production (the profane), that is the link between food as aesthetics and food as commerce. However, it is the primary images (Figure 2) that define the product, promised experiences and expectations, this is achieved by the socially and culturally embedded semiotic messages or the symbolic value of food (Mintz and Du Bois, 2002) that are transmitted by the advertisement, the campaign “signposts” experience and expectations of sensations and experiences; theoretically the advertisement creates the “expected places” of dining and entry into the “pleasure zone” (see Fantasia, 1995) of M&S’s food.

Marks & Spencer’s promotional food campaigns utilise a group of signifiers (as an element of the language of food and gastronomy) that signify a particular type of experience of food (see Figure 4) as “art” (Fantasia, 1995; Reed-Danahay, 1996), creativity and ritual (Marshall, 2005), and as such, the definition of the advertisement as the sign vehicle contextualises the images within a visual language of food and gastronomy that represents, pleasure, escape, authenticity and luxury. The signs and images offer a semiotic space in which the consumer may find/seek a different type of experience from everyday lived experience (Delind, 2006); the representations of food as seen in Figures 2 to 5 may be seen as representations of the elevated aesthetic of food within the context of M&S. The advertisement utilises a number of gastronomic-based conventions to direct the reader/consumer’s interpretation, for example the use of the simple table (Figure 3) it shows no people, no condiments or plates, yet its simplicity signposts an experience that is authentic and outside of time and space, it creates a “variety of escape hatches” (Uzzell, 1984) for the consumer by enabling them to relate the table to the sepia filled setting of Umbrian summers that are often used in films to reflect family, authenticity and love (Ferry, 2003), the table “. . . acts as a marker” (Culler, 1988, p. 159) of the core values and experiences of M&S by signifying food as part of the “legitimate art of living” (Reed-Danahay, 1996).

Reading M&S

The signs and images utilised by M&S can be broken into two elements, the “Narrative” and the “Conceptual” (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 56). Narrative structures always have a vector (a gaze or line of communication that directs the reader to the message being presented within the text). However, conceptual representations are not reliant on vectors in the transmission of meaning, as the conceptual aspect of food is socially and culturally embedded. Vectors are formed by lines of vision across the pictures, this leads to various connections between the images of food and the author, and as a consequence something can be both a participant and a vector (1996, p. 59). A vector provides a link or means of realisation between the consumer and the advertisement in which interpretation is achieved, the vector directs the reader and reinforces the importance of the representation; the vector becomes the signpost for the interpretation process. As a result, the “Means of realisation produce quite similar semantic relations” (2001, p. 44) that is, that the relationship between M&S’s advertisement and the reader/consumer is reinforced so as to enable the communication/interpretation of meaning to be identified and adopted by the reader/consumer in terms of shared cultural and social definitions of food and gastronomy. It provides a solid foundation of contextualisation in which interpretation and the semiotic consumption of M&S’s food may take place.

However, not all pictures and words used in the campaign support relations or a generic form of interpretation:

Rather, a given culture has a range of general, possible relations which is not tied to expression in any particular semiotic code[...]. This distribution of realisation possibilities across the semiotic codes is itself determined historically and socially (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 44).

Therefore, representation is mediated by a particular historical and ultimately cultural discourse (Artbury, 2005; O'Connor, 2005; O'Gorman, 2007); thus, the representations are contextualised by a discourse or language of food and gastronomy. As Kress and Van Leeuwen state:

Pictorial structures do not simply reproduce the structure of reality. On the contrary, they produce images of reality which are bound up with the interests of the social institutions within which the pictures are produced, circulated and read. They are ideological (1996, p. 45).

Consequently, the semiotic construction of M&S's marketing campaign has a goal, a purpose and is ideological (Ferguson, 1998); it cannot be taken outside of this process (although the individual may resist this; Hodge and Kress, 1995). Therefore, the advertisement becomes transactional; its status as an accepted and recognised social and cultural convention as a marketing technique come to represent various experiences of food and gastronomy. However, the socially and culturally accepted purpose M&S's campaign is to market and sell food and provisions so the experience of interpretation becomes transactional.

The reactional process within the interpretation sees the actors within the advertisement becoming reactors and the goals become phenomena (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 64). The reactor, that is, the participant who does the looking or gazing must possess a clear vector. Phenomenon is formed by another participant at who the reactor is looking or by a whole visual proposition. Thus, the images become the actor as they are non-transactional, yet still come to represent a phenomenon of the food and gastronomy by virtue of the fact that it is located within the M&S campaign, but become an element of the food gaze promising a multitude of experiences not just food for fuel, but reflects the language of food and gastronomy as defined above, again this is reinforced by the "This is not just food" slogan. This slogan and the M&S logo becomes a reactor, a transactional reaction is formulated by the reader as the advertisement "directs perception" by creating/reinforcing "signposts" of the M&S experience. Thus, the text directs perception while guiding the social and cultural significance of the images used; as a consequence, a conversion process takes place in which meaning is guided by changing perception through various techniques such as the use of text, changes in context and the meaning of the gastronomic experience (Marshall, 2005), Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, p. 67) define this process as "participant relay". This relay denotes a text-image relationship in which the advertisement extends or re-conceptualises the visual information. Furthermore, the interpretations of the narrative images of the M&S campaign are guided by the inclusion of what Kress and van Leeuwen define as "secondary participants" (1996, p. 67). These participants are not directly related via vectors but become related in other ways or circumstances (2001, p. 71), that is, the "setting" of the narrative images, thus highlighting the nature of food and gastronomy both conceptually and narratively within the campaign. For example, the food represented in Figure 3 may create the vector, but the table in the background highlights the nature of the relationship between the food and the authentic, and this represents a

relationship to the organic, natural as juxtaposition to the dominance of fast food culture (Delind, 2006) and the instantaneous nature of post-industrial society.

The initial stage of the interpretation/reading process locates the phenomenon of food and gastronomy and the subsequent representations within various discourses or ideologies that define food (Ferguson, 1998) are reinforced by the narrative and conceptual structures used in the advertisement. The recognition of these structures both locates and signposts experience of M&S food in a particular social or cultural movement, the embedding of meaning, the use of particular signs and images are contextualised with this movement. The campaign mixes and blurs notions of home, country, the old, the new, the commercial, but moves away from the commercial promotion objectives of the campaign to create an individualistic gastronomic space. The result is a form of hyperreality in which there is a breakdown in the temporal and spatial order of the images used, as they are empty, timeless and spaceless, but still represent or connote the M&S “This is not just food” experience, that is more significant than the actual consumption, as that will not be timeless or spaceless, as you queue buy the risotto, take it out of its plastic wrapper and place it in the microwave. The use of the various de-differentiated representations of culture and commerce within the advertisement become a blurred collage of images and experience that mask the profound realities that you are not producing authentic food but are symbolically and physically consuming it. The impact of such representations of food not only perpetuates social and cultural definitions of luxury and gastronomy but also affects the individual’s view of the world and their expectations. Therefore, the unification of the past, present and future within the advertisement leads the “interactive participant” into a position whereby they undertake multiple conceptual interpretations of the multiple definitions of the campaign. Although the representations used by M&S offers various escape attempts in which the interpreter can find meaning, etc., the experience of food and gastronomy becomes “. . . dominated by a consciousness which emphasizes the discontinuity of experience” (Harvey, 1993, p. 157). Nevertheless, the representation and the signified experiences of food and gastronomy contained within advertisements offers a refuge in which experience may be semiotically consumed in the form of concrete ontological actions.

Embedding the practice of gastronomy

The semiotic representations of food and gastronomy are socially and culturally embedded within contemporary life and create consensus constructs that underpin the M&S campaign, this embedding draws from the historical tradition of food and hospitality (O’Connor, 2005; O’Gorman, 2007; Claseen, 2007). Although the concept of hospitality and food is a significant element of culture, the concept of food needs to be contextualised within the time in which it is being judged, the semiotic representations of food on the M&S advertisement, as a form of gastronomy, represents a refuge from fast food culture and the instantaneous nature of post-modern society (Delind, 2006), even though it is marketing a form of fast food. The semiotic consumption of the M&S advertisement and what it offers creates a “pleasure zone” (Fantasia, 1995) in which we can escape into Utopian gastronomic space (see Figure 4), this space signifies a “graceful way of living” (Delind, 2006, p. 128), it bounds our past and memory creating a sense of belonging by drawing on the embedded definitions of food and gastronomy. The consumption of food is an “authoritative act” that “authenticates” (Marshall, 2005, p. 73) our identity and position within the world, it acts as a social marker of who we are (Gvion and Trostler, 2008). The campaign draws us into the consumption process

and in particular representations of food make social and cultural life real as the advertisements as well as menus are an “agency of culinary culture, lifestyle and systems” (Gvion and Trostler, 2008).

The images used in the campaign create what Johns and Pine (2002, p. 127) refer to as the “authentic environments” of food, the images used are empty of humans and modernity, they offer us an empty gastronomic space in which we can search for the authentic. Figures 2 to 5 offer a mediation on taste and gastronomy which define the preparation, social character, philosophy, aesthetics of food and the table, it identifies food and as art (Fantasia, 1995), its meaning is heightened by the juxtaposition of the images used in relation to the nature of the homogenisation of taste in contemporary society. This is semiotically reinforced by timeless nature of the representations, the advertisement uses the symbolic capacity of food to make this link to the past (Dawkins, 2009) heightening the differentiation of M&S food in relation to everyday lived experiences of eating.

The advertisement signposts various escape routes from everyday lived experience within the text that facilitates a notion of escape, and the representation of food that signifies a time and space which is differentiated from everyday lived experience by its “extraordinariness”, even beef burgers are elevated to the extraordinary (see Figure 5), and is differentiated from the routine and often unreflexive consumption of food as merely fuel (Marshall, 2005). Consequently, the M&S advertisement creates a configuration of time and space which elevates the context of the food served to that of the extraordinary; thus the context in which food is presented on the site is transformed by context (Marshall, 2005). This differentiation of time and space is a recurrent theme as the images used do not contain any temporal markers; in the case of the bread (see Figure 3) the images could have been taken at any point in time during the past 500 years, this constructed liminality offers a “. . . cognitive imaginative and practical space in which everyone can access the things that mark off the social from the private” (Coudry, 2001, p. 158). As such, the site signifies a certain binary opposition to everyday lived experience (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996; Delind, 2006), whereby the “interactive participant” is guided by the embedded “analytical process” to place themselves within the image to become a part of the gastronomic landscape. Although the sign vehicle’s symbolic authority (Meyrowitz, 1992; Coudry, 2001) and subsequent representations direct the interpreter towards an embedded “signposted” definition of M&S, food and gastronomy, the use of “empty” spaces creates a reflexive, “liminal” area, in which the consumer reflexively and hermeneutically interprets and projects personal meaning to the representations. The differentiation of time and space reinforces the significance of both the food and the experience that the individual finds within the consumption of food as escape (Williams, 2006) and identity.

It is within these liminal place or “pleasure zones” (Fantasia, 1995) that we find a release from our normal social constraints and to enter into a state of *communitas* (Belk *et al.*, 1989). This liminality and release enables us to explore food in terms of senses and the sensual, as an “intimate frontier” (Dawkins, 2009) in which we may locate the body; in other words the embedding of definitions of food within M&S’s campaign enables the individual to explore “. . . the role of the sensual, the emotional, the expressive, for maintaining layered sets of embodied relationships to food and place” (Delind, 2006, p. 121). It may be argued by adopting Magee’s (2007) proposal that the food images used by M&S (in conjunction with the lighting, soundtrack and often husky whispering of the narrator in the television advert) elevate the M&S food experience to the level of food pornography or the sensual, whereby there is a breakdown between sexual and

gustatory pleasures and the representations of food in the M&S advertisements are so removed from real life that it can only be consumed vicariously (Magee, 2007), as a consequence the advertisement creates a myth of food and the sensual or sexual (Reed-Danahay, 1996). The embedding of the definition of food within the M&S advertisement is more than just food as fuel; it comes to represent a significant element in our lives and reinforces its definition as extraordinary or even sacred.

M&S food and the sacred

The extraordinary nature of the food presented within the M&S campaign uses particular images to represent a time and place that is differentiated from everyday lived experience, it creates consensus constructs surrounding the shared expectations and understanding of the gastronomic experience. Although the relationship between food, the sacred and religion is clearly developed (Hely, 2002; Artbury, 2005; O'Connor, 2005; O'Gorman, 2007; Claseen, 2007), the semiotic construction of the food in the advertisement establishes a "configuration" of time, space' which embeds food as the sacred within the profane of everyday lived experience (Sered, 1988). M&S utilises a particular semiotic language which generates an embedded configuration of food within the sacred domain of culture, becoming part of the "legitimate art of living" (Reed-Danahay, 1996), becoming a contemporary "sacralisation ritual" (Belk *et al.*, 1989). The reason this phraseology has been chosen is that, the sacred as a distinguishing element of time and space can be seen to represent the "extraordinary" nature of food in contemporary society, this enables the recognition of the distinctive gastronomic time and space as represented within the campaign. Conceptually, this differentiation of time and space is developed, by adapting Durkheim's (1995) conception of the "sacred and profane" as a means of expressing this perceived differentiation and representation of the extraordinary within food marketing is just one of the means by which the individual frames their experiences of the social. Just as Silverstone (1988) envisages television as a "ritual frame", a cognitive, imaginative and practical space in which everyone can access the things that mark off the social from the private (Couldry, 2001, p. 158), it can be argued that M&S construct a ritual frame that is semiotically composed and represents the ritual nature of food in contemporary society.

For Durkheim (1995) the conception of the sacred and profane are socially generated and underline the distinction between social and ordinary experience, while Caillois (1988, p. 20) recognised that the two worlds of the mutually exclusive domains of the sacred and profane do not mingle in unmediated ways, that is, in the absence of collectively recognised rites of passage and acknowledged risks of admixture. "He took great care to outline how the profane needs the sacred, and the regulation, through rites, of the process of consecration in the passage into the sacred from the profane" (Genosko, 2003, p. 75). For Belk *et al.* (1989) consumers enact a sacred/profane distinction within common domains of experience and consumption becomes "... a vehicle of transcendent experience" (1989, p. 2). Berlyn suggests that human life tries to maintain a preferred level of arousal and seeks: "artificial sources of stimulation. . . to make up for the shortcomings of their environment" (1977, p. 170). The experience of food and gastronomy is embedded with ritual and significance (Fantasia, 1995; Ferry, 2003; Marshall, 2005), for example Figure 4 connotes and directs interpretation by drawing upon the recognised ritualisation and formality of dining (Gvion and Trostler, 2008), this ritual of dining creates social order, the ritual acts as a script that is regulated by the order of dishes, the formality of setting and intensity of experience (Marshall, 2005). The campaign offers the interactive participant or consumer a

“passage into the sacred” or the “sacred sphere of excess” (Caillois, 1988, p. 282). The embedded connotations of luxury within the advertisement marks a social distinction that enhances social bonds in which food becomes a celebration of society itself (van der Veen, 2003) and in the Durkheimian tradition “sacred”. Even though this maybe illusory, as the M&S site is in reality marketing and selling what may be termed fast or convenience food, it elevate the profanity or the inherent ordinariness of the product to that of the sacred.

Conclusion

The implications for this research and the conceptual model are that it enables the marketer to understand how the individual consumer interprets the semiotic language of food that is utilised within advertising and marketing campaigns. The utilisation of the model forwarded in this paper provides a framework in which to analyse how the individual constructs and interprets notions of food, such an understanding enables the marketer to build a cohesive definition of food that the consumer can relate to and understand within marketing campaigns. It also has implication for areas such as social marketing where for example, messages about healthy eating adopt a language of austerity that is in direct opposition to the hedonistic messages that are used by the fast food and high salt/fat processed food sector. It can be argued that the use of austerity marketing does not transfer well as it is direct opposition to the socially and cultural definitions of food identified within this paper, and transfers the definition of food from the realm of the sacred to that of the profane.

Understanding the production and consumption of the images contained within food marketing requires the exploration of the complex layers of discourses and influences that socially and culturally embed the language of food and gastronomy within contemporary society. It is this language that both the individual and the industry utilise to exchange the meanings and significance within both commercial and cultural settings. This paper has attempted to understand how the communication process works and how as practitioners we need to recognise that there is room for the qualitative analysis of the industry to support the increasingly quantitative tradition. Significantly, this paper attempts to highlight that both marketing and food/gastronomy is a social activity and as such is about people, and that in order to be effectively engage with our consumer base we need to understand our consumers and how they understand the world. Critically, the interpretation/reading of M&S's campaign by the consumer is an individual, hermeneutic and reflexive process in which the individual negotiates the social and cultural embedding of the represented signs and images. Consequently, the semiotic construction of M&S's food within the advertisement represents a particular ideology and construction of food that is embedded and reinforced by various social and cultural influences that elevates the notion of food and gastronomy to that of the sacred.

This is not just food! This is M&S food!

Note: That since writing this paper as a reaction to the economic recession and subsequent social trends, M&S have introduced the “Just Because” campaign, this mixes the approach identified above with a value element. However, the hedonistic definition of food remains.

Notes

1. See www.marksandspencer.com/Food-Wine
2. See www.marksandspencer.tv/player.aspx

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Corresponding author

Richard Tresidder can be contacted at: r.tresidder@shu.ac.uk

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