The Sex of Food and Ernest Dichter: The Illusion of Inevitability

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Market researchers and advertisers have historically encouraged Americans to make gendered assumptions about food. The founder of motivational research, Ernest Dichter, was a critical force in encouraging advertisers to emphasize a food's sex role. He believed that food advertisers could increase sales by promoting foods as female or male, because it would allow consumers to affirm their gender roles with each purchase. Examining his research reveals some of the ways he concocted these gendered associations. From his insights into Rice Krispies as a "bubbling, vivacious, young woman" to his advice on how to masculinize fish, this study analyzes Dichter's pronouncements about the sex of food and his efforts to create an illusion of inevitability.

In the early 1950s, Ernest Dichter transformed the advertising world with his motivational research technique. From his earliest efforts to study consumer behavior to his pronouncements on how to shape it, Dichter was a well-paid, well-respected advertising consultant. One of the foundations of Dichter's influence was his recommendation to promote a food's sex. He characterized the sex of food in two primary ways. First, he frequently stated that foods had a sex, referring to them explicitly as male or female. Second, he also advised advertisers to signify food as masculine or feminine. Dichter believed that by highlighting a food's sex or its gender, advertisers could make their products indispensable to consumers seeking to affirm their gender identity.

Dichter's approach came from his training in consumer issues in both Austria and the United States. He sought to understand the consumer psyche and determine what types of emotions motivated particular kinds of purchases. From today's vantage point, it might seem historically inevitable that researchers would try to probe consumers' inner psyche. Yet, Dichter designed a plan to capture consumer thoughts and feelings in 1944, just six years after immigrating to the United States from Austria. With his Ph.D. in psychology, Dichter published a brief, one-page research proposal in the American Sociological Association's journal, Sociometry. Its overly complex title, "The Psychodramatic Research Project on Commodities as Intersocial Media," disguised a fairly simple idea: study people's attitudes when they buy things.

Without denying the importance of researchers' traditional ways of classifying consumers, such as by age, income, and education, Dichter envisioned a means by which social scientists could better understand the "psychodramatic" process of buying. "Every buying act is a highly dramatic event," he argued, "full of spontaneity and emotion. A representation of this act on the stage under controlled conditions should prove a new tool for observing people's relation to products in all their subtle details." Dichter believed that by adding a psychological dimension to the market research already taking place, advertisers would add a potent weapon to their established arsenal. Motivational research would give advertisers new avenues to reach potential buyers and shore up their consumer base.

According to Dichter, conventional research variables could explain a lot about a consumer, but those characteristics did not "reveal why people buy in terms of the meanings the purchased product or brand had for them." The hidden, personal reasons that compelled people to buy was the "psychodrama." The mystery of the psychodrama fueled Dichter until his death in 1991, and continued to compel his imitators into the twenty-first century.

Advertisers turned to psychologists to understand consumers long before Dichter and his motivational research appeared on the scene. Earlier than most, for example, the influential advertising couple Stanley Resor and Helen Lansdowne Resor, who headed the J. Walter Thompson Company, saw the advantage in employing someone who claimed to have some understanding of human behavior. In 1916, John B. Watson, the renowned father of behaviorism, began working as a consultant with their agency. After he left the Psychology Department at Johns Hopkins University, he worked in advertising full-time, rising to Vice President at J. Walter Thompson in 1924.

Over the course of the twentieth century, psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis grew in respectability.
During the postwar era, television, movies, and magazines popularized psychoanalysis. This growing awareness occurred, even though, according to historian Nathan Hale, there were no “more than 1400 practicing analysts in the world in 1957, perhaps 14,000 people in analysis, and no more than 100,000 who had completed treatment.” While it originated in Europe, most psychoanalysis took place in the United States. The factors contributing to that unique cultural embrace, also helped set the stage for American readiness to believe in Ernest Dichter and motivational research.

According to historian Daniel Horowitz, Dichter saw “the market researcher as therapist to a troubled society.” He hoped that by figuring out people’s buying habits, he could help Americans “grow in self-awareness and self-esteem.” He believed that consumers would gain not just items in a shopping cart, but also an improved inner self.

The height of Dichter’s influence as psychiatrist to the American consumer not surprisingly coincided with the “Golden Age” of the American popularization of Freud. According to Hale, Freud’s status reached its peak in 1956, on the 100th anniversary of his birth, the same year that Ernest Jones’s three-volume study of Freud appeared. Dichter cut a Freudian figure and “packaged himself by using controversial, speculative, and Freudian remarks to capture the attention of image-hungry clients and audiences . . . [He] focused on hidden, irrational, and often sexualized reasons for consumers’ behavior . . .” In his 1979 autobiography, Getting Motivated, Dichter stressed his association, noting that for about twenty years he lived “across the street from Sigmund Freud” and that he owed his success in public speaking to a course offered by Freud’s daughter-in-law, Esti Freud. Given that “Freud’s stature among educated Americans (including business leaders) was second only to that of Einstein,” advertising executives undoubtedly relished their partnership with an Austrian-born psychoanalyst of their own.

Dichter also benefited from another postwar era phenomenon, whereby “professionals became the experts of the age, providing scientific and psychological means to achieve personal well-being.” Armed with this credibility, Dichter analyzed thousands of surveys and interviews conducted with consumers. He probed the responses for ways products could help consumers, particularly looking for ways they might affirm gender roles.

His work was fully in step with the climate of the 1950s, an era of intense gender conformity. Cultural prescriptions for gender roles took on tremendous importance for both men and women following World War II. Americans had record numbers of children, got married younger, got divorced less, and embraced traditional gender role ideals, all in an effort to contain their fears and demonstrate their successes.

The value of women focused on homemaking and consumerism even found its way onto the international stage, with the famous “Kitchen Debates” between American Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Ignoring the reality that women worked outside the home, Americans claimed that breadwinners were men, allowing for women’s idealized role as homemaker. With these clear gender divisions, Americans claimed superiority over the Russians, who violated “natural” sex roles by expecting women to work outside the home, just as men did. During the 1950s, American culture placed considerable emphasis on men being men, and women being women. Many people believed that crossing or blurring gender boundaries would lead to severe consequences, not just for the adults who selfishly undertook the actions, but also with devastating effects on their children.

Some psychoanalysts played a critical role in convincing Americans that there must be clearly defined, different roles for women and men. In the 1940s, psychiatrists shrilly “blamed women’s increasing independence for a rash of social disasters.” Author Philip Wylie blamed all of society’s problems on “Momism.” He claimed that women’s independence posed a serious threat to manhood and that it also contributed to, and this is a partial list, “brillancy, theft, murder, homosexuality, drunkenness, financial depression, chaos, and war.” Eminent psychiatrists soon deemed “Momism” a pathological syndrome. At a 1957 conference, some analysts “wondered how ‘a boy can learn what it means to be a man . . . when mother and father in so many homes carry out identical tasks . . .’” Despite the fact that his wife supported their family as a concert pianist early in his career, Dichter also embraced this adherence to separate roles and identities for men and women.

When car manufacturers sought his advice on how to sell their newest models, Ernest Dichter suggested that advertisements tap into what he believed were consumers’ deep-seated psychological motivations for owning a car. According to his findings, male consumers considered cars female. Dichter thought that advertisers should use this knowledge to encourage men to buy cars to affirm their gender identity. He suggested that Chrysler’s ads take advantage of his belief that “a convertible was like a man’s mistress and a sedan was like a wife.” This campaign was one of Dichter’s earliest and most renowned successes.

Dichter returned to the theme of psychological fulfillment when he undertook similar studies for food advertisers. In a 1955 memorandum on the “Psychology of Food” for the Fitzgerald advertising agency, he explored various aspects of the human relationship to food and particularly focused on food’s psychological dimension. He suggested two ways that he believed advertisers could reach consumers. The first was that he found food to be “intimately connected with all aspects of a man’s life, his social position, his religion, his morals, his philosophy.” His second observation built on the first, noting that because food in the United States was so plentiful in the postwar era, there was a “changing attitude” toward food. This meant that advertisers had to think beyond hunger and
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nourishment, and find ways to convince consumers that their food would "satisfy additional needs," particularly their need to showcase other aspects of their lives.18

One of the primary ways Dichter encouraged food advertisers to meet consumer needs, as was apparent with his car advice, was to position products to affirm sex roles. Dichter believed that people categorized a food's sex, considering it either female or male. His own subscription to a gendered taxonomy of food was evident in his assessment of the findings. For example, he suggested, "Perhaps the most typically feminine food is cake . . . the wedding cake's . . . the symbol of the feminine organ. The act of cutting the first slice by the bride and bridegroom together clearly stands as a symbol of defloration." He presented these claims matter-of-factly as truth; cake was female.

Advertising has played an important role in shaping goods to be masculine or feminine.19 This is not to suggest that this was a unique action; advertisers were just one force creating cultural signs within American life. In private homes, for example, the desire to reinforce male or female identity was evident as parents decorated children's rooms with color-coded, gendered icons: footballs for their sons and ballerina tutus for their daughters. These symbols worked precisely because they reflected clearly delineated sex roles. Historic sex and food associations, however, were much more arbitrary. While there may have been a strong cultural association between food and a particular sex, it was not inevitable or even necessarily logical. Men and women both ate all kinds of food.

Dichter's analysis for food advertisers generally focused on female respondents, the group he believed was their primary target. In one study, he reported that women were dissatisfied with dry cakes. Based on this finding, he concluded, "Women's demand for moistness in a cake reinforced its feminine symbolism." Dichter did not attribute women's preference for moistness simply to taste. Though some women complained of cakes "tasting like sawdust," Dichter focused his critique on the respondents. How the cake tasted did not matter to Dichter; he was concerned with women's ability to please men. In his psychoanalysis, he argued that distaste for dry cake "may represent a projection onto the cake of the woman's feelings about herself. She wants to be moist and fresh, dewy-eyed and moist-lipped, not a dried up, barren old crone."20 By naming the cake female, he was able to ascribe it with feminine characteristics and impose on it a supposed female longing for youth - presumably in goal of pleasing men. Dichter did not address men's cake preferences, but his interpretation, laden with sexual overtones, leaves little doubt about what it would mean that men wanted moist cake.

Dichter's studies lay bare the calculated ways in which he encouraged advertisers to create food and sex associations. He called on pseudo-science to provide what he considered conclusive evidence of a link between a person's sex and their physiological response. In a 1955 memo, Dichter wrote, that in an experiment conducted by a famous surgeon, it was discovered that food has sex. While administering barium during the examination of the esophagus, the good doctor found that, when he mentioned the word 'salad' to his female patients, their esophagi dilated, permitting the passage of the chalky compound. When the word 'steak' was suggested to the male patients, their esophagi reacted similarly. But when the words were reversed, the esophagi of both sexes remained unchanged. Food advertisers should take the consumer's sex into account, in order to execute the most effective appeals as a basis of recognition.21

Dichter believed that salad was a female food, while steak was male. He tried to substantiate a belief that women favorably responded to female foods, and men, likewise, positively reacted to male foods, but if confronted with "opposite-sex" foods, men and women would not be open to them, both physically and psychologically. Dichter used this anecdote to ground his argument that foods had a sex and that people responded to foods based on their sex.

In a 1955 study for General Mills, Dichter examined "Present and Future Psychological Trends in Cereal."22 Dichter argued that some cereals had clear identities. Wheaties, for example, was found to be "More masculine," "For teen-agers," "For poor people," and "Nutritious." He encouraged General Mills to make something of his finding that some cereal brands had a gender. For example, Dichter believed, "Rice Krispies are essentially feminine."23 An interesting choice of words, tying essentialism, women, and Rice Krispies all together into a seemingly obvious triumvirate.

Essentialism enabled Dichter to assert that rice was naturally female, and to suggest that its innate biological make-up was what determined it. He crafted his language to suggest inevitability, closing the possibility of interpreting rice in any other way. Dichter naturalized its gender as indisputably feminine. Moreover, not only was the cereal female, it behaved in appropriate gendered ways.

 Able to impress two different clients with his findings, Dichter reiterated his Rice Krispies insights for the Leo Burnett advertising agency, when he submitted a "Creative Research Memo on the Sex of Rice."24 As usual, Dichter choose freely from his cache of explanations, which included alleged physiological responses, analysis of consumer perceptions, and what he deemed the inherent gender of a food. Even though he argued that Rice Krispies was feminine, the consumer perceptions he described did not really consider the cereal as female, but rather as eaten by females. He found that the number of "respondents who thought that Rice Krispies would be eaten by women was over four times larger than the number of respondents who thought that Rice Krispies would be eaten by men. No other cereal drew a similarly one-sided reaction." His own description of the responses affirmed that consumers had a clear sense of the sex of the eaters, not the cereal per se.
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The consumers described the cereal as "light-hearted, fun to eat, amusing." Dichter, however, took this and claimed the cereal was a "bubbling, vivacious, young woman." He concluded that "Further tests also revealed, that anthropomorphically Rice Krispies were seen not only as a cheerful woman, but as one who had an even temper, was not addicted to extremes, and 'wore well' every day."

Of rice generally, he asserted that the "evidence proves unmistakably" that rice was conceived as a feminine food. He noted, "Rice is a strong female. It is young and healthy. And it is blessed with great fertility." It was on the issue of fertility that Dichter added some flourish to his analysis. Many respondents innocently noted the change in rice while it cooked, but Dichter claimed that they also, subconsciously associate it with biological phenomena.

Rice is something that gains life while it cooks. It expands and swells. It is as if little eggs were maturing fast, ready to burst with new life at any moment. The babbling, boiling water contributes added realism to this process of pseudo-birth.

Dichter also found that many people remembered, "that rice is grown in water." He framed this recollection in the context of pregnancy, claiming that rice is "enveloped and nourished by warm mud, and this is a basic biological picture directly leading to conscious and subconscious associations with the placenta." In the predominantly male world of advertising, whose understanding of pregnancy and birth largely came from passing out cigars in the waiting room, Dichter may have found a receptive audience.

A year later, in a 1956 article in Dichter’s Institute for Motivational Research’s monthly newsletter, Motivations, he recounted the famous surgeon story and alerted readers to the "fascinating contrasts in the sex attributes of food." He claimed to have found that "Rice is felt as being feminine, but potatoes as masculine; tea is feminine, coffee is strongly masculine. The two most extremes are meat and cake, the latter being the most feminine of foods." Many Americans today would find some of these associations familiar. The description of a “meat and potatoes guy” still evokes a kind of no-nonsense masculinity and hot tea, in particular, is considered by many Americans a dainty drink for women. Some foods, however, did not readily yield up their associations to Dichter, so he proclaimed, “Some foods are bisexual, among them roast chicken and oranges." In arguing that some foods have both male and female characteristics, Dichter created an ambiguity - if foods were not one or the other, it could also be that they were neither.

While many embraced Dichter’s insights, detractors dismissed the practice of motivational research as quackery. The marketing field periodically reflected on its validity and value to the profession. For example, between 1955 and 1958, The Journal of Marketing featured a series of articles and letters to the journal centered on the question that headlined one, “Is Motivation Research Really an Instrument of the Devil?” Critics of motivational research blasted its methodological shortcomings. In addition to charging it with ineffectiveness, some critics questioned the immorality of motivational research’s “invasion of people’s private thoughts to persuade them to buy things.”

Acknowledging the tremendous influence of motivational research, journalist and social critic Vance Packard published a surprisingly successful book called The Hidden Persuaders. This 1957 runaway best seller alerted Americans to a new reality: social scientists were recording and selling consumers’ thoughts and feelings to major corporations. Not only were pollsters surveying a consumer’s age, sex, and income; not only were store spies observing the products they bought; but psychologists were now trying to understand the subconscious to determine why people bought what they did. Moreover, these scientists were also watching how many times consumers blinked in the aisles of the grocery-store, determining what colors attracted them to products on the shelf, and employing countless other invasive, creepy practices that riled Americans, even as they intrigued them.

In his critical exposé of motivational research, Packard repeatedly underscored the significance of his findings; this was a very big business. Major blue-chip corporations paid hefty sums to motivational researchers to better market their products. In 1956, Fortune magazine reported that the largest advertisers and their advertising agencies spent approximately one billion dollars a year on motivational research. Packard tried to impress upon consumers that they should be skeptical of advertising and marketing, warning that those businesses sought not only their money, but also their subconscious.

In the 1950s, Dichter was a respected figure in the advertising world. His ideas helped make him a successful businessperson and he played an important role in shaping advertising strategies for many large corporations. In June 1961, he was called to testify in front of the Senate Antitrust and Monopoly subcommittee investigating truth in packaging. An article about the proceedings described him as “an expert on why people buy what they do.” Dichter argued to the subcommittee that better labels would be ineffective because “consumers, despite their growing sophistication, invariably succumbed to human emotional weaknesses no matter what they purchased. ‘What people actually spend their money on in most instances,’ he said, ‘are psychological differences, illusory brand images.’”

Even though the next year the New York Times reported that the use of motivational research had “died down,” and Dichter himself acknowledged, “that the field has lost much of its electricity,” he retained an influential status. In 1963, according to Betty Friedan in her classic The Feminine Mystique, even without the “electricity,” Dichter earned about one million dollars a year for his work as a motivational researcher. Friedan’s chapter on “The Sexual Sell” used Dichter’s studies to analyze some of the ways in which motivational researchers and advertisers targeted women. Building on Packard’s analysis, she alerted women to some of the practices used to lure them.
into purchases. She also explored the strategies advertisers used to shape and limit women’s gender roles.34

Much of Dichter’s early work focused on foods he argued were feminine, but in the late 1960s and early 1970s he generally focused on foods he claimed were masculine. It is in his analysis of meat that the most obvious popular Freudian associations between sex and food were evident. In a 1968 study submitted to Bonsib, Inc., an advertising agency based in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Dichter laid out his meat findings. He noted that

Our research reveals that shape is perhaps the most fascinating attribute of wiensers and luncheon meats. Despite the fact that shape may suggest and reinforce the artificiality of these products, it also tends to stimulate sexual symbolism. On a subconscious level, wiensers and luncheon meats, to some extent are perceived as phallic representations.35

Again blurring the line between the sex of the food and that of the consumer, Dichter found that women and men had different responses to meat. For example, he found that “Men do not appear to be as ‘embarrassed’ in eating wiensers as women appear to be.” Dichter suggested that women’s discomfort arose because they were “spellbound and definitely attracted by the meats.” Dichter also found that “little boys, in particular, exhibit a stark preference for wiensers. Psychologically, this suggests an expression of their desire to emulate the male parent.” As an example of how meats could be successfully portrayed in advertising to capture subconscious sexual desire, Dichter cited the popular 1960s Oscar Mayer jingle:

‘I wish I were an Oscar Mayer wiener.
That is what I’d truly love to be
For if I were an Oscar Mayer wiener.
Everyone would be in love with me.’36

The analysis, however, was not limited to meat. Dichter also argued in his Handbook of Consumer Motivations that “fruits, roots, and foods of elongated shape” such as asparagus had phallic significance. Asparagus was believed to increase “sexual potency” and even to “have originated on the grave of a rapist.” He tried to legitimize his analysis by proclaiming, “This is not an invention of Freud but derives from many different societies. Asparagus in its very cultivation and growth makes this sexual significance possible. Asparagus is grown in tomblie beds and pushed through in the spring in a rather sudden fashion, growing rapidly, almost visibly.”37

Dichter’s analysis of consumer responses to these “male” foods, which seem invariably phallic, suggests that they embarrassed women, while men sought them out. In this hypersexual world of food and identity, Dichter omitted any mention of homosexual desire. Nowhere in his writings did he address the significance of desire, with men embracing male foods, while women rejected them. If men desired female cars, as wives and mistresses, what did male desire of male foods mean, especially with its charged sexual imagery? Dichter left this question unanswered.

Confusion pervaded Dichter’s analysis. His contradictory assertions undermined his conceit that motivational research was really for the benefit of the consumer. Indeed, altruistic aims did not motivate Dichter and his suggestions did not help shoppers become better-realized people. As was clear in his 1961 testimony before the Senate subcommittee, Dichter had spent his career becoming “an expert on why people buy what they do,” not to help people gain in self-esteem, but to manipulate their “emotional weaknesses.” His studies sought to figure out what “psychological differences” and “illusory brand images” advertisers could use to increase sales.38

Increasingly, it was apparent even in Dichter’s writings that food did not have a sex, but was being assigned a sex role. Every time he wrote about the sex of food, meat was his prime example of a male food. Yet, in a 1971 analysis, Dichter found that “women wouldn’t buy lamb for their families because it was considered a weaker, less virile food than other meats.” He explained that, “Only when we began to masculinize the image and to describe cuts of lamb in more exciting terms did we begin to succeed.”39

He offered another example of this gender role construction with fish. Earlier, in his 1964 Handbook of Consumer Motivations, Dichter had argued that ancient people and modern psychologists had long associated fish with fertility. This association would, by his logic, therefore, make fish a female food. Yet in 1971, in a section on “What to do when people won’t eat, or won’t eat the food you want them to eat,” he “recommended promoting fish as a man’s food, featuring big, powerful game fish such as swordfish in ads and fish ‘steaks’ for an aura of strength.” Dichter’s fish strategy stemmed from the reality that it was the trappings that sold a food’s gender identity. To sell fish as male, he suggested, “surrounding the product with the appetite appeal of hearty vegetables and beer or ale and eliminating dainty, feminine connotations in serving dishes or settings.”40

As he described meat and fish industries struggling with sales, Dichter exposed himself and the vacuity of the illusion he had tried to create. He threw back the curtains and revealed that sex and gender were ascribed to the food, not found inside it. No longer was he claiming that advertisers should determine, or even could determine a food’s sex identity, as he did with cars and rice. Instead, by the 1970s he was clearly telling advertisers to create the gender links that would best sell their product. Despite these revelations and the obvious fakiness with which Dichter made these gender constructs, his ideas still comprised a major tenet of the advertising world’s vision at the start of the 21st century.

Beyond the gendered food associations evident in the ads themselves, advertisers also contend that gender is still critical to their marketing strategies.41 In August 2002, Marianne Oglo, a Senior Brand Planner at J. Walter Thompson’s New York office, reported that, “gender association plays a fundamental role in our discussions with consumers when exploring their perceptions and
associations with various brands.” The words and imagery that Oglo heard from early 21st-century tea consumers, for example, mirrored consumer responses that Dichter recorded fifty years earlier. Oglo found that,

Almost unanimously, consumers associate tea with feminine and nurturing qualities, compared to coffee, which they consider to be masculine and virile. . . When trying to make Lipton tea more relevant and contemporary to a younger target, words like ‘weak’, ‘for when you’re sick’, or ‘what grandma gave me’ only hurt us.42

Advertisers and manufacturers struggling to enhance the market for their products found themselves hemmed in by the same gendered constructs they helped to define in years past.

In the case of tea, American advertisers previously used visual and verbal markers to help signify tea as feminine. Tea drinking habits in Europe and Asia reveal the extent to which American advertisers constructed tea drinking as female. Men around the world drink tea regularly, making it one of the most commonly consumed beverages. However, American advertisers had limited their campaigns to attracting female consumers. Now, facing a declining market, they wanted to reposition their product to attract men, or in the words of modern advertisers, “rebrand” it. Oglo assessed the dilemma faced by advertisers today, when she recounted,

Of course, we would never think to rebrand Lipton as the tea for weight lifters, but we are conscious of this ubiquitous perception and as a result, considering ways to subtly tweak visual and other cues that would further perpetuate a weak, feminine persona. Take for example the packaging evolution over the past few years. The colors are much more bold and confident than ever before. Lipton ‘Soothing Moments’ has been dropped off the herbal tea packs.43

Advertisers had been so successful in promoting and solidifying tea’s image and gender identity, that they now found it difficult to broaden their consumer base.

Oglo used “weight lifters” to signify an extreme masculinity that they believed would never seriously consider tea, but she was still hopeful that they could join men in general to drink tea. Recounting a study of potential consumers, she suggested one way they hoped to tip the gender scale:

We observed a classic example of [gender association] during a down & dirty 2-week coffee deprivation study we conducted in NJ this past Spring. We asked approximately 30 consumers to replace all but one cup of coffee with a premium Lipton tea, and to record their day-to-day feelings and experience in a little customized diary. One of the consumers, a fireman, admitted to putting the tea into a cooler so his colleagues at the firehouse wouldn’t think of him as being a wimpy tea drinker! Afterwards, some of the men talked about feeling more bonded with their wives b/c they had a chance to spend ‘tea-time’ with them...and in doing so, show their partners a softer side.44

At the beginning of the 20th century, advertisers still employed motivational research, hungry for information they hoped could make the difference in sales. They focused their efforts not just on taste-tests and nutritional data, but also on motivating human emotions to compel people or inspire people to buy their products.

It is clear from advertisers’ research, strategies, and ads, gender continues to be one of the most critical ways to target consumers. However, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, some advertisers began to realize that if they asserted that foods had an essential sex, they limited themselves to half of the market. Many moved away from suggesting rigid gender roles for most foods, but continued to use gender in their targeting. Moreover, they still insisted that eating certain foods signified proper conformity to gender roles.

Some advertisers suggested that consumers could even use neutral foods to affirm their gender roles. For example, Danielle Henry, an advertising executive with Ogilvy, explained the challenges of targeting tweens for her Honeycomb cereal account. She found that while girls and boys are the cereal in even proportions, advertisers “can’t talk to boys and girls at the same time,” so “it’s all about the positioning.” She claimed “Girls like the unique shape,” “Whereas with boys they like the size, crunch, texture and ‘challenge’ of eating the cereal.” To reach these young consumers, Henry described how Ogilvy targeted girls by asserting Honeycomb’s value as a “fashion accessory” that would enable them to gain “acceptance without conformity,” while they targeted boys with machismo ads, encouraging them to “test the limits.”45 Henry, and others like her, positioned their products as essential tools for consumers seeking to affirm their gender identity.

In a symposium on the Future Study of Public Opinion that appeared in the Public Opinion Quarterly in 1987, more than forty years after he began his pioneering work, Dichter continued to reject the long-standing criticism that motivational research put too much stock in psychological findings. He claimed defiantly, “Attitude research in the future will learn to take itself even more seriously.” He also sustained a belief that “Rather than snapshots, we need 3D movies capable of registering the multivariates of human motivations – anger, hope, and disappointments.”46 Bob Berenson, the Vice Chairman and General Manager of Grey Worldwide, when asked what role Ernest Dichter’s motivational research played in advertising in 2002, suggested that the use of “psychographics” was a dated approach.47 Yet one of Grey’s most recent marketing tools was a qualitative and quantitative method of analysis called ETP, Emotional Trigger Points. Elizabeth Ellers, an executive vice-president and Managing Partner at Grey, explained that they believe that “nearly 60 percent of purchase decisions are due to emotional triggers.” Their analytic tool, the ETP, “deconstructs emotional
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relationships” and tries to determine the “emotions with the greatest leverage.” Advertisers still reflected Dichter’s influence as they pursued a belief that feelings like approachability, warmth, and curiosity were as important, if not more important, than fundamentals like quality, taste, and price.

Nor was Grey alone in following Dichter’s lead to chart consumer relationships with products. Young & Rubicam’s newest tool, BrandAsset Valuator, reflected the preoccupation with feelings seen throughout modern day advertising. Claiming to be more mathematical and scientific, they still predicated their measurements on consumer’s emotional responses to products and tried to understand subconscious motivation. Advertisers continued to believe that motivational research was an important tool. Nor was this an isolated trend. Emotional continued to be a buzzword. Research tools and books like Emotional Branding, Emotional SONAR, and Emotional Lexicon continued to command industry attention.

Indeed, even at the start of the 21st century, the food-advertising climate still reflected the imprint of Ernest Dichter. He wrote persuasively about the sex of food and tried to suggest his illusions as inevitabilities. Food advertisers bought it, literally and figuratively, forging an alliance with experts to persuade Americans of a food’s gender identity and its potential to lure consumers in the 1950s and beyond.

NOTES

3 Dichter, 432.
6 Horowitz, 159-162.
7 Hale, 277-284.
8 Horowitz, 159-162.
12 Ibid., ix-xxvi.
14 Herman, 278; Hale, 296.
15 Stern, 19-22.
18 Ibid., 1-3.
21 Ibid., 18.
23 Ibid., 2-3, 7, 9, 73, 76.
24 Dichter, “Creative Research Memo on the Sex of Rice.”
26 Ibid., 7.
27 Ibid.
30 Obrec.


42 Marianne Oglo, J Walter Thompson Company, interview by author, 15 September 2002, email transcripts in author’s possession.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.


47 Presentation by Bob Berenson to participants of the Advertising Educational Fund’s Visiting Professor Program, Grey Advertising, New York City, 23 July 2002, notes in author’s possession.

48 Presentation by Elizabeth Ellers to participants of the Advertising Educational Fund’s Visiting Professor Program, Grey Advertising, New York City, 23 July 2002, notes in author’s possession.

49 Presentation by Ed Lebar to participants of the Advertising Educational Fund’s Visiting Professor Program, Young & Rubicam, New York City, 22 July 2002, promotional material and notes in author’s possession.

50 Stern, 19-22.


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People Magazine. 2002.


