



Author: Vodeb, Oliver
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Designed Pleasure: How Advertising Is Selling Food as Drugs

Oliver Vodeb

Abstract

This chapter will focus on advertising representations of heavily engineered addictive food. I will argue that there is a direct link between illegal drug culture and addictive food culture, on the level of representations of ways of consumption as well as rhetoric, created and maintained through advertising of the legitimate, commercial 'high impact' food industry. Advertising is by purpose designed in a way that is unreflected upon by consumers and the wider public, as it renders the culture of addiction invisible through its communicative integration into discourses of pleasure. At the same time, such advertising directly promotes food in particular ways, which directly enhance the drug like aspects of food. Such advertising is designed to precondition the consumer and create a relationship between the consumer and promoted food, which in turn, should maximise profits of the advertiser and strengthen the consumer's relation to the most potent substances of food that create states of pleasure. Fast foods, food high in sugar, with a high glycemic index, high in salt and fat and as well as a combination of these are perfect for creating addiction. This chemical engineering is also supported by a marketing discourse that, heavily designed through advertising, creates a superficial culture of pleasure. This pleasure driven advertising culture is a legitimate, commercially enforced and legal drug culture.

Key Words: Food, Addiction, Representation, Advertising, Design, Culture, Society, Pleasure.

1. Food and Drugs: (Un) Obvious Relation

In the summer of 2014 food enthusiasts, cooks, and young people of Maribor (the second biggest city of Slovenia), started to organise regular Culinary Festivals on the city's old food market (Image 1 and 2). The working class city is experiencing hard times, as Slovenia is in crisis. Widespread corruption and the country's big debt have put people in the position where the future looks grim – especially for the younger population. Alcohol consumption is on the rise, and we can speculate with some certainty, so is the consumption of illicit drugs.



Image 1: Scenes from Culinary Festival, Maribor, Slovenia © June 2014. Courtesy of Oliver Vodeb.



Image 2: Scenes from Culinary Festival, Maribor, Slovenia © June 2014. Courtesy of Oliver Vodeb.

Food, besides serving as the source for generating income of small-scale business, is the perfect medium for social interaction and plays here an emancipatory role. Good vibrations and positive moods are communicated, and positive examples of engagement are put on display in an otherwise rather depressive social climate. Good food for low prices is bringing people together. Friends meet and talk, food is being discussed and above all as the organisers advertise, food ‘pampers people’s senses’.

When looking at the image I have to smile, not only do I know some of the people in the image, but there was something else that grabbed my attention. ‘Breaking Good. We don’t cook Meth, we cook food’ is written on the blackboard, which is advertising pork roast on the grill with cherry chutney and a salad – all for 5 EUR. This ironic and humorous approach to communication is a social commentary on the city’s illicit drug culture and calls for more meaningful and smart activities – such as cooking. But there is something else at play as the connection between food and drugs is much deeper.

Historically there was no sharp distinction between food and drugs. Before the introduction of potato, beer was the second most important source of nourishment in big parts of central and north Europe.¹ Beer is, in Germany, still considered food and so is wine in France and Italy.

Drugs and food address our senses. Both are used to produce pleasure. Both are used in relation to un/happiness. Food rituals as family meals or meals at particular occasions, like Christmas for example serve this very purpose. Drugs too, are used to create feelings of happiness – like for example [Ecstasy](#) (MDMA) and they change moods. The striving for happiness is directly related to pleasure and this seems to be at the core of human lives. Freud wrote in his *Civilisation and its Discontents* the following about this relation:

We will therefore turn to the less ambitious question of what men themselves show by their behaviour to be the purpose and intention of their lives. What do they demand of life and wish to achieve in it? The answer to this can hardly be in doubt. They strive after happiness; they want to become happy and to remain so. This endeavour has two sides, a positive and a negative aim. It aims, on the one hand, at an absence of pain and unpleasure, and, on the other, at the experiencing of strong feelings of pleasure. In its narrower sense the word ‘happiness’ only relates to the last. In conformity with this dichotomy in his aims, man’s activity develops in two directions, according as it seeks to realize - in the main, or even exclusively -the one or the other of these aims. As we see, what decides the purpose of life is simply the programme of the pleasure principle. This principle dominates the operation of the mental apparatus from the start.

There can be no doubt about its efficacy, and yet its programme is at loggerheads with the whole world, with the macrocosm as much as with the microcosm. There is no possibility at all of its being carried through; all the regulations of the universe run counter to it. One feels inclined to say that the intention that man should be 'happy' is not included in the plan of 'Creation'. What we call happiness in the strictest sense comes from the (preferably sudden) satisfaction of needs, which have been dammed up to a high degree, and it is from its nature only possible as an episodic phenomenon. When any situation that is desired by the pleasure principle is prolonged, it only produces a feeling of mild contentment. We are so made that we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things. Thus our possibilities of happiness are already restricted by our constitution. Unhappiness is much less difficult to experience...²

Our culinary pleasures are also about the satisfaction of our longing for happiness and the social aspect of food, its binding intimate nature, protects us from unhappiness not only as it is giving us direct physical pleasure but also as it is the medium for close and warm social interaction with other people. Unhappiness and suffering comes also from relations to other people, and this kind of suffering is, for Freud, the most severe.

The nature of pleasure forces us to constantly seek for more, as pleasure never stays for long. This works in favour of the food industry, as more food needs to be constantly consumed to achieve more pleasure. Food as drugs work on the level of substances, textures, and aromas that provide pleasure. Salt, sugar and fat are the main substances that we seek when we want to satisfy our pleasure.³ The food industry is engineering and designing food accordingly in order to provide maximum effects of pleasure, which in turn develops cravings for particular substances. More and more research shows that the effect of certain foods is very similar to the effects of drugs. Brain scans show that foods – for example fast food or sweets, are engineered to have an optimum level of sugar, or fat, or salt, but most of all a combination of the three, to trigger the same brain areas and produce cravings in the same way as for example cocaine.⁴

The most obvious example of engineered addictive food are potato chips, that besides a combination of fat, salt and sugar also provide a specific crisp, a feeling in our mouth and a sound that all together provides immense pleasure.⁵ As Pulitzer winning investigative journalist Michael Moss has shown, chips, as pleasure delivering devices, are engineered and designed with great effort:

... a company owned by Pepsi- Frito-Lay has a research complex near Dallas, where nearly 500 chemists, psychologists and technicians conduct research that costs up to \$30 million a year, and the science corps focused intense amounts of resources on questions of crunch, mouth feel and aroma for each of their chips items. Their tools include a \$40,000 device that simulated a chewing mouth to test and perfect the chips, discovering things like the perfect break point: people like a chip that snaps with about four pounds of pressure per square inch.⁶

The food industry does not only design food as drugs, its commercial representations also resemble those that we can observe in the illicit drug culture.

In the paper 'Depiction of Food as Having Drug-like Properties in Televised Food Advertisements Directed at Children: Portrayals as Pleasure Enhancing and Addictive',⁷ Page and Brewster analyzed 147 food commercials from the year 2005 televised during children's TV programming on U.S. broadcast networks. Their research, which examined the influence of commercials for inducing problematic behaviors in children, such as substance use behavior and physical violence, showed that commercials contained depictions of exaggerated pleasure sensation and dependency and/or addiction. Other illicit drug culture like behavior found present in the advertisements included portrayals of physical violence, trickery, stealing, and fighting as well as taking extreme measures to obtain food.⁸ Advertisements that contained such depictions were directly promoting products, mostly high in sugar. 8.2% of the commercials were coded for an exaggerated pleasure sensation and 12.9% showed depictions of dependency or addiction. 16.3% portrayed conflict, fighting, or taking extreme measures, 10.2% depicted thievery or stealing, 6.1% showed trickery, and 9.5% contained portrayals of physical violence;⁹ This research focused on advertisements aimed at children on American television and through content analysis it shows the relationship between advertisements and illicit drug cultures on the level of content and representation. Illicit drug culture like behavior was, in this research, mostly found in products containing high amounts of sugar, less salt and fat, but the authors conclude that this is due the fact that fast food chains like McDonald's advertised more the experience of visiting the restaurant than actual products.

Representations of food that resemble illicit drug cultures can however also be found in advertisements aimed at adults. The connections between food and drugs vary in their explicitness and level of directness. In the following I will show examples of advertising, which connects food with drugs and promotes ways of engaging with food that promises states of pleasure directly through the engagement with the potent substance.

2. Pushing the Substance

The advertising industry strategically focuses on highlighting certain attributes of food – of which the food industry is aware of creating effects of pleasure. For example, pizza companies introduce more cheese (salt and fat) to increase pleasure and when Pizza Hut introduced the Cheese Stuffed Crust in 1995, it boosted sales by 300 million dollars.¹⁰ The extra cheese uses the crust- which people usually don't eat- as an additional delivery mechanism for salt, sugar and fat, which are the key substances for creating pleasure.¹¹ Its current popular pizzas include the 'crazy cheesy crust'¹² and the 'cheesy bites'¹³ pizzas. The crazy cheesy crust pizza took more than a year to engineer and design in order to create the mixture of five cheeses that create the 'wow' effect and 'ooey-gooley' stretch.¹⁴ The pizza is designed to deliver maximum pleasure and their advertisements focus on the substance delivery devices – the cheese filled pockets.

Pizza Hut speaks in one of their commercials about 'sixteen pockets of bliss' when it presents its new invention. These pockets can be seen in food as the equivalent to drug delivery devices. The form of a drug influences the relationship we develop with it. The easier it is for us to take a drug physically, the more the form of a drug is culturally accepted, the less inhibited we are going to be in relation to the consumption of the drug. The bite size portions, which are easy to hold and eat with our hands are fulfilling this function. The 'pockets of bliss' are here to provide pleasure. They are portioned to be eaten one after the other-pleasure, as identified previously, which is an episodic phenomenon and needs to be constantly reinforced. The pockets are fat and salt delivery devices and according to research published last year, such foods: 'are stimulating the brains in the same way as drugs of abuse and can be considered as a potentially addictive substance.'¹⁵

The most sold cookie in the world, Oreo received unwanted major media presence last year when it was reported that Oreo cookies are potentially more addictive than cocaine. Through measurements researchers found out that: 'greater number of neurons that were activated in the brain's pleasure centre in animals that were conditioned to Oreos compared to animals that were conditioned to cocaine [or morphine].'¹⁶

Analysing Oreo TV advertisements in several countries shows one parallel. Most of the advertisements teach our children and us how to consume Oreos in the way that will give us the biggest pleasure. It teaches us to go straight to the source-one needs to first open the cookie and lick the filling, then we put the halves of the cookie back together and dip it in milk and eat.¹⁷ This example similarly demonstrates behaviour that Page and Brewster found in relation to children, whereby they are showing skills and performing tricks in order to fulfil this particular, taught and prescribed way of consuming the cookie as they overcome various obstacles.

To lick the essence of the cookie, the isolated high sugar filling first, is related to the way food is being produced at large today. As biomedical imaging researcher at Brookhaven National Laboratory Dr. Gene-Jack Wang noted in an October 2013 interview for the Atlantic: ‘We make our food very similar to cocaine now’ ... ‘[Now] we purify our food [...] Our ancestors ate whole grains, but we’re eating white bread. American Indians ate corn; we eat corn syrup.’¹⁸

Oreo Advertisements don’t talk only to children, adults are also being preconditioned to eat the cookies and indulge in pleasure in the same way. The Oreo ‘Kid Inside’ advertisement made for Oreo’s 100th Birthday showed the inside of a bus full of adults with a grey, boring adult atmosphere.¹⁹ When children walk in with plates full of Oreo cookies, the scene becomes bright and the adults – who already know how to eat Oreos – are reminded about the child inside them with the slogan ‘celebrate the kid inside’ and a child holding a sign with ‘next stop childhood’ written on it.

The highly engineered Oreo cookies and the suggestive advertisements, which incorporate behavioural patterns representing pleasure at the very act of consumption naturalise the food-as drug on the level of substance, acts of consumption and representation. Food and drugs become one although for the majority of the audience the relation is not made explicit.

The quick sugar/ chocolate fix is sometimes referred to literally, as in the case of Australian food and cooking magazine ‘Delicious’ which April 2014 cover advertised the ‘chocolate FIX, 7 recipes you NEED to have, which makes sense as research suggests that cocoa influences our mood.’²⁰

The language here again refers to the purity of the drug and it seems that there is a fundamental shift happening where drugs and foods become more and more one again. They used to be one for the biggest part of human history - German word *Genussmittel*, for example, even signifies certain foods (like coffee, tea chocolate...) as food for pleasure ²¹but food and drugs were more and more separated when:

The march of science brought both more refined knowledge of drugs and the ability to make them in intensified forms. Various distilled spirits had been around for some time, but their mass production and trade made them more widely available, which led many drinkers away from beer and wine and helped fuel the “gin craze” in eighteenth-century England. Similarly, after the alkaloid cocaine was synthesized in 1877, the older practices of coca leaf chewing and drinking coca tea and wine gave way to cocaine inhalation and injection. Opium smoking was supplanted by morphine and, eventually, heroin injection. More generally, plant-based remedies gave rise to early pharmaceutical chemistry.²²

Taxonomies and representation of food are always connected to politics and ideologies. Advertising food as drugs seems the perfect match. Marshal McLuhan already warned us of the narcotic effects of media.²³ There has always been an interesting paradox with visual language – while it makes certain things visible it renders certain things at the same time invisible.

The fact that food – our closest and most intimate relation to nature – is represented through advertising in ways that are meant to precondition us to engage in addictive behaviour engaging with substances that are designed to create states of pleasure and are at the same time food and addictive substances, in my opinion suggests that we should seriously reconsider our societies' relation to drugs, food and advertising.

Notes

¹ Craig Reinerman, 'Policing Pleasure: Food Drugs and the Politics of Ingestion,' *Gastronomica: Journal of Food and Culture* 7:3 (2007): 53- 61.

² Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010): 68.

³ Michael Moss, *Salt Sugar Fat* (New York: Random House, 2013).

⁴ Joseph Schroeder, J.C. Honohan, R.H. Markson, L. Cameron, K.S. Bantis and G.C. Lopez, *Nucleus accumbens C-Fos Expression Is Correlated with Conditioned Place Preference to Cocaine, Morphine and High Fat/Sugar Food Consumption*. (Presented at the Society for Neuroscience Conference 2013).

⁵ Moss, *Salt Sugar Fat*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁷ Randy Page and Aaron Brewster, 'Depiction of Food as Having Drug-Like Properties in Televised Food Advertisements Directed at Children: Portrayals as Pleasure Enhancing and Addictive,' *Journal of Paediatric Health Care* 23.3 (2009): 150-157.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ See Vanessa Wong, *Can 'Crazy Cheesy Crust' Top Pizza Hut's Stuffed Crust?*, 2013, viewed 2 July 2014, <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2013-04-03/can-crazy-cheesy-crust-top-pizza-hut-s-stuffed-crust>.

¹¹ Moss, *Salt Sugar Fat*.

¹² 'Crazy Cheesy Crust,' Pizza Hut Pizza Advertisement, viewed 23 August 2014, <http://i.huffpost.com/gen/1066492/original.jpg>.

¹³ 'Cheesy Bites Pizza', Pizza Hut Promotional Image, viewed 22 August 2014, <http://www.pizzahut.se/upl/images/280732.jpg>.

¹⁴ See Sofie Egan, 'Stunt Food', *Wired*, viewed July 10 2014, <http://www.wired.com/2013/09/stuntfoods/>.

¹⁵ Schroeder et. al., *Nucleus accumbens C-Fos Expression*.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ ‘Oreo Sippy Cup,’ Advertisement, viewed 28 August 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxLYWGlaQ-E>.

¹⁸ Dr. Gene-Jack Wang, in James Hamblin, ‘How Oreos Work like Cocaine’, *The Atlantic*, viewed 20 August 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/10/how-oreos-work-like-cocaine/280578/>.

¹⁹ ‘Kid Inside’ Oreo Advertisement, viewed 20 August 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrWIOxBVSpY>.

²⁰ Matthew P. Pase et al., ‘Cocoa Polyphenols Enhance Positive Mood States but Not Cognitive Performance: A Randomized, Placebo-Controlled Trial,’ *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 27.5 (2013): 451-458.

²¹ Reinerman, ‘Policing Pleasure,’ 53- 61.

²² Ibid.

²³ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Routledge, 2001).

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Dr Oliver Vodeb teaches and researches at Swinburne University of Technology. He is director, editor and curator of Memefest Festival of Socially Responsive Communication and Art and facilitator of the Memefest Network. His last book is titled *InDEBTed TO INTERVENE, Critical Lessons in Debt, Communication, Art and Theoretical Practice*. He is about to start working on a book on Food Democracy published by Intellect books UK.