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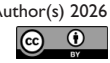
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Eat your gender: Strategies of gendering in food ads

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Abstract

This study examines food advertisements in *Women's Health* and *Men's Health* magazines as a hitherto underexplored site of gendered meaning-making. Using content analysis and multimodal critical discourse analysis, we investigate a large corpus of food ads and identify three dominant gendering strategies: (1) food advertising is more prevalent in *Women's Health*, often directing women toward self-care and caring for others; (2) food types are gendered, with 'healthy' foods associated with femininity and protein or 'unhealthy' foods with masculinity; (3) multimodal representations construct food as feminine through emotional, relational, and sensual appeals, and as masculine through references to performance, science, and sport fame. We show how food is semiotised to reproduce traditional gender stereotypes while also reinforcing newer ideals, such as the muscular female body adding a new regime to women's labour. Overall, food advertising sustains neoliberal discourses that frame food as a technology for gendering the self and the body.

Keywords

gender, food ads, semiotisation, multimodality, body ideals, health, neoliberalism

Introduction

Lifestyle magazines, particularly those that focus on health and fitness, have become widely read across the globe. One such popular publication self-proclaimed as the number one authority on health and fitness, *Men's Health* (MH), attracts over 60 million readers worldwide (Men's Health, 2024), while its female counterpart, *Women's Health* (WH), boasts more than 44 million (The Editors of Women's Health, 2026). The primary

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aim of these magazines is to help readers achieve a healthier lifestyle by providing, as the editors emphasise, science-backed information, expert advice, and motivational content on physical fitness, nutrition, mental wellbeing, and general wellness. However, in addition to articles on health- and fitness-related topics readers are also exposed to a multitude of advertisements saturating the content of these magazines.

While browsing an issue of WH, we noticed a conspicuous abundance of food-related ads. What stood out was that these ads did not promote food solely as sustenance or source of energy. Rather, with headlines such as 'Achieving a beautiful you never tasted so good!' and 'Love yourself. Snack accordingly', they portrayed food as a source of beauty, self-love, and indulgence. Another striking feature was the inclusion of female bodies, some muscular, alongside the food suggesting a link between specific food and a body type not traditionally associated with normative femininity. Thus, the representations in the ads appeared to somewhat diverge from traditional discourses surrounding women and food, which have typically promoted a more ascetic interpretation of food as a necessary evil to be consumed in moderation in the pursuit of slimness, and slimness being long equated with beauty (Gill, 2008). Muscular female bodies were largely absent from such representations. Interestingly, when reading an issue of MH published in the same month and year, we observed that the types of food advertised, and the accompanying messages, differed. They emphasised food as fuel to support men's physical endurance and were accompanied by images of very muscular men.

It was this observation that sparked our research interest: were these discursive patterns indicative of wider shifts in gender representations? Was food advertising emerging as a new space where contemporary gender norms were being negotiated or repurposed? To explore these questions, the present study adopts a critical and multimodal discourse approach to examine how gender is constructed and promoted in a larger sample of food ads sourced from WH and MH. Specifically, our aim is to investigate what the food adverts reveal about contemporary gender norms, and how these are semiotically constructed through representations of food and bodies.

Since Goffman's (1979) seminal work, the link between advertising and gender stereotypes, particularly those related to women and their bodies, has been established and explored in detail (e.g., Pedersen, 2002; Ringrow, 2016). Much of this research has focused on beauty products including cosmetics, consistently revealing the stereotypical portrayal of women through tropes such as slimness, seductiveness, and sexual appeal (Ringrow, 2016). Though to a lesser extent, food adverts have also been examined demonstrating gendering through the focus on domesticity and the restricted positioning of women as the main food providers and caregivers (Pirani et al., 2018).

With the rise of neoliberalism and the ideal of the always-available, mobile, and constantly self-improving neoliberal worker, food has acquired additional functions (Bouvier and Chen, 2021a; Lupton, 2012). Beyond serving as a source of energy, it is increasingly considered a tool for cognitive and bodily enhancements (Datta and Chakraborty, 2018; Harjunen, 2017; Lupton, 2012). Unlike cosmetics, which act externally upon the body, food is now marketed as a mechanism for improving the outer layer of the body by working from the inside out. In Foucauldian terms (Foucault, 1988), food has become yet another technology of the self, aimed at individual self-transformation. While many studies have explored how cosmetics and beauty products externalise gender

norms specifically in relation to women, little is known about how food participates in constructing and reinforcing ideals of both femininity and masculinity (for exceptions see Bouvier and Chen, 2021a; Fuller et al., 2013; Pedersen, 2002).

It is crucial to emphasise that food, as an organic substance, is not inherently gendered. However, echoing Butler's (1990: 145) claim that normative gendering practices emerge not through coercion but through 'a regulated process of repetition', food can become gendered through the repeated associations of particular foods with specific identities and behaviours as it happens in the mass medium of advertising. These associations are not merely rhetorical: they can attribute to foods qualities deemed desirable or appropriate for women and men (e.g., Lupton, 1996; Rothgerber, 2013; Wardle et al., 2004). In this way, food both becomes *gendered* and can *gender* in the process reinforcing certain scripts of how to *look*, *behave*, and *be* as a woman or a man in contemporary society.

Given food's intrinsic connection to the body (Cooks, 2009) and its new function in supporting a neoliberal credo of bodily self-optimisation, food advertising that features female and male bodies can offer valuable insights into the forms of corporeality valorised in contemporary society, and the gendered ideals and ideologies these representations sustain. Analysing which types of bodies are depicted in food ads, and which foods are seen as instrumental to achieving them, is significant because bodies displayed in mass advertising tend to standardise appearance norms, creating unrealistic expectations and pressure to conform. Such pressure has been linked to body dissatisfaction, lower self-esteem and eating disorders (Aubrey and Hahn, 2016; Tiggemann and Williamson, 2000). While women, and young women in particular, tend to be the most targeted group and thus more susceptible to such pressures, research has demonstrated that men are, too, increasingly compelled to achieve an idealised body (Murnen, 2011). Through uncovering the discursive mechanisms by which food and bodies are linked in gendered ways, the research seeks to raise critical awareness of how such ideals are constructed semiotically in the mass medium of food advertising. In doing so, it attempts to contribute to ongoing feminist efforts within critical, gender, and discourse studies to challenge normative gender constructions in popular culture productions and the hierarchies and pressures that they impose (e.g., Favaro and Gill, 2019; Lazar, 2007; Martínez-Jiménez, 2022; Riley et al., 2022). Thus, by bringing together food, gender, and body constructions in food adverts, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What kinds of foods are promoted in advertisements published in the popular health and lifestyle magazines *Women's Health* (WH) and *Men's Health* (MH), and what kinds of bodies are readers/viewers impelled to pursue through their consumption?
2. How and to what extent is food infused with gendered meanings and what kinds of semiotic choices are used to achieve this? What does this semiotisation of food reveal about contemporary norms of how to look, be and behave as a woman or man?

To address these questions, the study draws on a combination of Content Analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020; Ledin and Machin, 2020; Machin et al., 2016). Content Analysis

enables the systematic identification and quantification of food types and body representations across a larger sample of WH and MH advertisements, offering empirical evidence for the prevalence of particular representational patterns. MCDA integrates two related approaches: the social semiotic approach and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Ledin and Machin, 2020). The social semiotic perspective understands meaning-making as a process based on the selection and combination of semiotic choices, not only linguistic ones, but also visual and auditory modes and resources such as colour, gaze, sound, typography, and spatial composition. In this way, the notion of discourse extends beyond the linguistic dimension to encompass a wider set of meaning-making resources that are particularly relevant to multimodal ensembles such as ads. Moreover, social semiotics assumes that signs do not have one fixed or stable meaning but rather a range of possible meanings, or meaning potentials, which can be realised differently depending on the context, mode, culture, and communicative purpose. Perspectives from CDA complement this by emphasising that semiotic choices, even those that appear trivial, are never neutral; they are infused with values and assumptions that reflect the dominant ideologies of the time in which they are used (Bouvier and Chen, 2021b; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020; Ledin and Machin, 2020). Studying semiotic choices is therefore vital if we want to understand how ideologies, including those of gender, are discursively constructed and what kind of values and moral judgements these constructions encode. We examine this in detail by conducting a multimodal juxtaposition-based analysis and scrutinising semiotic choices in a smaller sample of food ads promoting identical or near-identical products made by the same company but targeted at either female or male audiences. In this way, we are able to reveal how exactly semiotic choices are mobilised to construct gender and gender norms.

It is important to state at the outset that we understand gender as a socio-cultural construct, clearly distinct from the biological sex assigned at birth. We acknowledge that biological sex, and the binary it implies, has no bearing on individual abilities, and that gender and sexual identities, as well as masculinities and femininities, are diverse and influenced by socialisation, social status, and other relevant socio-cultural categories. At the same time, despite progressive movements in society, binary gender differentiations and the stereotypes associated with them persist and continue to affect individuals in detrimental ways. The very existence and huge popularity of magazines such as WH and MH attest to the endurance of the binary. If research is to contribute to reducing inequalities and improving people's lives and opportunities, we must expose and examine how this binary is fuelled and sustained through seemingly trivial mass media such as advertising and lifestyle magazines, so that as researchers, colleagues, friends, and parents we are better equipped to identify, critique, and deconstruct it. This study aims to contribute to that social critique.

Gender, body, and food in ads

Gender representations in the mass media, and specifically in advertising, have attracted sustained scholarly attention over the past five decades. Spanning different geographical contexts and types of advertisements, this body of research consistently shows that advertising perpetuates stereotypical gender roles and attributes traditional, often

reductive, gender characteristics to women and men (Eisend, 2010; Pirani et al., 2018). Across a diverse range of products, beauty, and cosmetics in particular, women are typically shown in limited heterosexual roles as homemakers, mothers, wives, girlfriends, or objects of sexual desire, always available and oriented towards male approval (Pirani et al., 2018; Ringrow, 2016). These portrayals are further underpinned by the display of specific physical characteristics inextricably linked with the ideal female body such as youth, thinness, and Whiteness (Murnen, 2011). In contrast, men have largely been represented in positions of power and privilege, depicted in occupational roles that reinforce the ideal of men as breadwinners (Pirani et al., 2018). Their bodies, too, must conform to a particular ideal upheld by hegemonic masculinity and persistently disseminated by the media (Connell, 2020), that is, an ideal that emphasises high muscularity and low body fat.

While the young and thin body continues to dominate media portrayals, recent years have seen an increasing emphasis on women's muscularity. This shift is closely linked to the rise of 'fitspiration' (a portmanteau of 'fitness' and 'inspiration'), a social media trend that developed a decade ago to encourage exercise and healthy eating, ostensibly moving beyond thinness and weight loss (Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2018). While fitspiration could be considered a positive phenomenon to promote a healthy lifestyle, research shows that, much like the thin-body ideal, it creates unattainable expectations with negative consequences for body image, mental health, and physical well-being (Jeronimo and Carraca, 2022). Moreover, it constitutes a new disciplinary technology (Foucault, 1988) which, in a neoliberal vein, promotes individualised self-care while obscuring or even reinforcing wider social, economic and class inequalities; having the choice and time for individualised self-care fuelled by healthy diets and expensive gym memberships is only available to those in higher income brackets. Despite these concerns, the trend has been readily commodified by advertising, which turned its interest towards capitalising on the upgraded mesomorphic female body by marketing products deemed necessary for its achievement and upkeep. This has in turn placed increasing emphasis on food, since attaining a fit and strong body requires not only physical exercise but also adherence to specific dietary regimes.

Stereotypical associations between specific foods and gender are deeply embedded in society, think of red meat and salads. Food practices themselves are also performed along gendered lines: everyday food-related work is still largely regarded as women's responsibilities, while professional cooking is positioned as a masculine domain of expertise and authority (Cairns and Johnston, 2015). Although women have entered the professional food sphere, with some deriving pleasure from food consumption and everyday cooking, food work continues to reproduce gender and class hierarchies (Cairns and Johnston, 2015; Goodman and Jaworska, 2020). Much of the research on the relationship between food and gender has been conducted in sociology, cultural studies and marketing, where the focus has often been on the *what*, that is, the messages communicated through food and food practices (e.g., Cairns and Johnston, 2015; Rosenfeld and Tomiyama, 2021; Rothgerber, 2013). This work typically examines individuals' experiences with food as well as the content of narratives, including media texts, demonstrating how gender serves as a determiner of attitudes to, and practices within, food. Less attention, however, has been paid to the *how*, that is, the specific discursive choices including

linguistic, visual, and other multimodal resources through which food and food narratives are constructed for women and men. Attending to these choices can help identify the discursive resources and strategies through which gendering is encoded and performed.

Within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a substantial body of research has demonstrated how specific lexico-grammatical and visual choices index aspects of femininity and masculinity and in doing so, perform gendering across media contexts, including health and lifestyle magazines. For example, Motschenbacher (2009) showed how adverts in popular women's and men's magazines gender the body through lexical associations with particular body parts. Terms such as 'knees', 'feet' and 'muscles' were predominantly used in reference to men, whereas words such as 'cuticles', 'fingertip', 'nails', 'lip' and 'skin' were associated with women. Employing a feminist CDA approach to cosmetics adverts in contemporary British and French magazines, Ringrow (2016) found that women's bodies were frequently described as flawed through the use of negative adjectives such as 'dry', 'rough' or 'blemished'. The advertised products promised a corporeal transformation, positioning the desired body as 'younger', 'firmer' and 'brighter'. Similarly, a CDA study by Fuller et al. (2013) looking at food-related ads, articles, and columns featuring in *Women's Health* and *Men's Health* revealed a strong association between the consumption of 'good' food in WH with appearance-related 'benefits' such as slimness. At the same time, food in MH was linked predominantly to a lean and muscular male physique much needed for the improvement of men's performance. Still, despite the emphasis on bodily control in both magazines, men were nevertheless allowed to indulge in food presented in WH as unfeminine, such as red meat and alcohol, demonstrating a clear gendered normativity in relation to food consumption.

Turning to visual cues, Machin and Thornborrow (2003) analysed representations of women in global editions of *Cosmopolitan*. Contrary to earlier research that showed depictions of women as inferior, sexualised and engaged in trivial pursuits, the researchers identified portrayals of women as powerful and agentic. This was conveyed through images that placed women predominantly in professional occupations. Yet, women were frequently depicted wearing short skirts, revealing tops, high heels, and shiny red lipstick – elements of sexualisation that, in this context, were framed as tools enabling women to achieve their goals. And while these features constructed the 'Cosmo girl' as empowered, independent, energetic, and successful, they reduced her agency to the deployment of her sexuality. Koller (2008) examined the use of the colour pink across various discursive contexts, including advertisements and magazines. The study showed how pink has become a signifier of postfeminist femininity. Although generally perceived as the colour of femininity and sexuality, pink has entered contexts where it is employed to convey other traits such as independence or financial and professional power. Koller (2008) argues that colour as a semiotic choice can do both reproduce and challenge gender stereotypes and calls for more research on colours in their contexts of use, particularly in advertising and magazines, which are designed for sensory and emotional mass appeal and thus provide an important space to explore the strategic deployment of colour as well as other semiotic resources.

Despite the bodily and symbolic significance of food in everyday life, and the stereotypical associations of particular foods with particular genders, discourse analytical research has paid comparatively little attention to multimodal representations of food as a site of gendered meaning making. Pedersen (2002) was one of the first researchers to examine representations of food and gender by focusing on the visual rhetoric of advertisements for the popular cereal brand Kellogg's Special K. The analysis showed that the advertising attempted to parody gender stereotypes and unrealistic body ideals. At the same time, it continued to perpetuate negative body image and stereotyping, portraying women as sexualised and objectified, while at the same time men were depicted as powerful and in control regardless of their appearance. More recently, Bouvier and Chen (2021a) conducted a multimodal analysis of food packaging of protein snacks, demonstrating how visual and textual cues can function as vehicles for gendering. Protein products aimed at men were typically packaged in wrappers displaying angular shapes, slim straight fonts, and smooth textures, connoting science and technology. These associations were reinforced by colours such as metallic silver and dark blue, alongside lexical choices such as 'Nitrotech-power' and 'Syntha-6'. In contrast, protein snacks marketed to women employed curved shapes, rounded fonts, bright colours, and rougher textures to convey naturalness, optimism, and vitality. The textual design also differed: products for women included more buzzwords such as 'gluten-free', 'ethical', 'vegan', and 'organic', and frequently addressed the consumer directly through second-person pronouns ('you', 'your'). These choices, coupled with highly personalised messaging, urged women not only to maintain a slim body but also to embody vitality and an ethical stance – demands from which men were largely absolved. Bouvier and Chen (2021a) conclude that supposedly trivial discourse formats such as food packaging play a significant role in reinforcing gender stereotypes. Beyond the buzzwords of 'ethical', 'organic' or 'workout' lie deeply gendered constructions that associate women with nature and nurture, while reserving science and technology for men. More importantly, these stereotypes are reproduced not in explicit but in subtle and implicit ways, precisely through the interplay of visual and textual choices. This highlights the importance of examining not just language, but both visual and textual elements and particularly in discourses often dismissed as trivial in order to understand how such choices reproduce gender hierarchies and inequalities (Machin et al., 2016). We attend to this call by examining how food advertisements in contemporary and widely circulated health and lifestyle magazines, such as WH and MH, encode femininity and masculinity, and what kind of gender norms and stereotypes they perpetuate. In other words, we intend to show how food is mobilised as a technology of gendering the self, the practices of bodily regulation this entails, and what such processes reveal about current ideas of body, health and gender relations.

Methodology

The data under investigation comes from WH and MH published by the same company, Hearst (originally Rodale Inc.). The choice of the two magazines was influenced by their global popularity, which we felt could indicate the kind of dominant norms around femininity and masculinity that the editors and advertisers deem widely accepted and

desirable. Since WH and MH are 'sibling' magazines whose goal is to promote a healthy body and a healthy lifestyle, comparing ads from both allows for a consistent and systematic identification of representations encoded as feminine vs masculine. For the purpose of this study, it was decided to choose the UK versions of these magazines published between 2017 and 2021 as a representative of the broader Western geopolitical context and contemporary neoliberal times.

Sampling procedures

There were in total 4255 adverts: 2170 in WH and 2085 in MH. In order to identify food adverts, the sampling procedure adhered to strict inclusion and exclusion criteria. At the outset, only adverts promoting foodstuffs were considered. For the purpose of this study, the term 'food' was understood as outlined by the General Food Law Regulation (EC, 2002) No 178/2002, which describes food as:

> any substance or product, whether processed, partially processed or unprocessed, intended to be, or reasonably expected to be ingested by humans. 'Food' includes drink, chewing gum and any substance, including water, intentionally incorporated into the food during its manufacture, preparation or treatment.

This definition includes drinks and food supplements, with the latter defined by European Union (EU) Directive on Food Supplements (2002/46/EC) as 'foodstuffs the purpose of which is to supplement the normal diet and which are concentrated sources of nutrients'. Since adverts for food services and stores do not promote a specific food product, which is one of the key areas of investigation in this study, it was decided to exclude these adverts from our sample. Following these guidelines, the sample of food adverts (Sample 1) used in the quantitative part of the analysis related to food classification totalled to 988 (25% of all adverts), including 636 in WH (29% of all adverts in WH) and 352 in MH (16% of all adverts in MH). Considering the gendered lens applied to the present analysis, the much higher number of food ads in WH compared to MH is noteworthy because it reinforces the notions that food and eating are primarily seen as the realm of femininity and thus are targeted more at women.

Due to both the large number of food adverts identified in WH and MH and the necessity to generate a suitable data for the qualitative visual analysis, the sample procedure was subject to a further rigorous method of selection. The first step involved excluding non-standard adverts, such as advertorials, which are typically written in article-like style and therefore represent a hybrid genre (Zhou, 2012). Importantly, to ensure image clarity and readability during the coding procedure, only adverts bigger than half a page in size were considered. This step led to the exclusion of 304 WH food adverts (48% of WH, Sample 1) and 133 (38% of MH, Sample 1) of MH food adverts. Furthermore, since the body is of particular importance in this research, it was also ensured that the selected food adverts featured an image of a woman in WH and a man in MH. This reduced the final sample (Sample 2) of food adverts for the analysis related to body classification and the qualitative visual analysis to 111 food adverts, of which 75 were disseminated in WH and 36 in MH.

Finally, to assess how semiotic resources interact to construct gendered representations of food and bodies, the final analytical procedure, which we refer to as a multimodal juxtaposition-based analysis, involves comparing two corresponding 'for her' and 'for him' adverts (Sample 3). The adverts in this sample were selected from the most prominent food categories (see Section 'Food and body types') and had to meet a specific criterion: they promoted identical or near-identical products produced by the same company, but tailored their advertising to either a female or a male audience. A total of six adverts were identified, and the semiotic choices employed for the purposes of this gendered 'tailoring' were examined in detail.

Analytical framework

Our methodology combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches drawing on Content Analysis (CA) and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). CA can be defined as 'the systematic assignment of communication content to categories according to rules', with the data analysed 'to describe typical patterns or characteristics or to identify important relationships among the content qualities examined' (Riffe et al., 2019: 3). In line with this definition, the CA enabled us to identify and quantify the dominant types of foods and bodies advertised to women and men, hinting at the gendered ideals of femininity and masculinity the ads disseminate. While Craig (1992: 198) notes that CA is limited in the depth of detail it can provide about gender and gender constructions, it nonetheless offers a useful starting point; it can show the bigger or macro picture of representational patterns and allows for selecting representative data for subsequent and more detailed qualitative and critical explorations. For the purpose of this study, CA is therefore complemented with MCDA which focuses on semiotic resources such as text, image, font, colour, etc., and how they convey ideas, attitudes and moods (Ledin and Machin, 2018). It pays attention to the representations of people and how people and their bodies are visually represented though elements such as pose and gaze, and the kind of ideas these may connotate.

Food classification. In the first instance, the food adverts in Sample 1 were classified into separate categories. The categorisation was based on 'The Eatwell Guide', which represents the government's advice on healthy balanced diet by indicating the main food groups and the recommended proportions (Public Health England, 2018). For the purpose of this study, the food products were first split into two main categories, i.e., 'regular food' including drinks and 'food supplements'. Table 1 below illustrates the outcome of this categorisation process, listing all sub-categories that were identified within the two main food groups.

Body classification. To systematically reveal the kinds of female and male bodies featured in the studied food adverts (Sample 2), we selected age, adiposity and muscularity as the key elements to code, because these aspects have been identified in previous research as crucial contributors to the construction of gendered bodies (e.g., Jankowski et al., 2017; Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2018; Wasylkiw et al., 2009). Age, adiposity, and muscularity can help us establish the dominant types of bodily ideals including any manifestations of

Table 1. Food product categories.

Regular food	Food supplements
Dairy products; fruit, veg, and seeds; high fat or sugary food; infant/children food; pre-packed food; protein products; starchy food; drinks	Healthy gut bacteria; protein suppl.; vitamins and minerals; weight loss suppl.; nutritional suppl.

Table 2. Body-related aspects under scrutiny.

Category	Description
Age	Young (age between 18 and 39), mid-life (age between 40 and 60), older (age 60+), unclear (body too obscured). This can also be mentioned or known (as in the case of a celebrity).
Adiposity	Thin (slight frame with little to no visible fat stores), average (medium frame with moderate level of visible fat), corpulent body shape (high level of excess fat), unclear (body too obscured or only head visible). This can also be assessed by looking at the face + shoulder area (e.g., cheekbones, jawline, visible bones, and the size of arms).
Muscularity	Yes (visible muscle definition), no (no sign of muscles), unclear (body too obscured or head only). This can be assessed by looking at the shoulders + arms (esp. in the case of a male body).

objectification. Table 2 provides a comprehensive description of the classification process, with each category systematically unpacked to aid transparency and replicability.

Inter-rating. In order to increase robustness and reliability of the results, the coding of bodies using the characteristics listed in Table 2 were subject to inter-coder reliability (ICR) procedure. To attain ICR, extant literature recommends that minimum of two independent coders review at least 20% of adverts (O'Connor and Joffe, 2020; Riffe et al., 2019). Taking this into consideration, all adverts ($N=111$; Sample 2) were coded by one of the authors of this study, with 20% of adverts ($N=22$) double coded by a professional male. To assess agreement, Cohen's kappa was chosen as it allows for a chance agreement. The results of the Cohen's kappa showed that all categories ($N=7$) in this study ranged from 0.91 to 1.0, which according to Banerjee et al. (1999: 6), represents excellent agreement beyond chance.

An in-depth multimodal analysis of food ads 'for her' and 'for him'. In this part, we adopt a juxtaposition-based analytical procedure to study prominent semiotic resources that range from body-related characteristics such as age, adiposity, muscularity, but also further multimodal aspects such as gaze, pose, colour and settings. Gaze and pose are important to consider when studying body images because they cannot only 'implicitly communicate kinds of attitudes and in turn evaluate the actions of participants . . . that are not openly stated' but also reveal the attempted visual connection between the advert and the readers (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 76). For example, through a direct gaze,

readers/viewers are not only acknowledged but also receive a 'visual' invitation to create an imaginary relationship with the models; while an indirect gaze creates a boundary between the model and readers/viewers (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). As for pose, it can either place the model within the active category or objectify them (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009). The choice of settings too can perform gendering through representing women and men in particular and perhaps separate places and spaces (Ledin and Machin, 2018). Colour can do the same by tapping into established associations within people's mental models that link a particular colour or colours with a particular gender identity (e.g., Koller, 2008). As for colour, we consider its modality as an analytical category. The concept of 'modality' refers to the truth or credibility of the semiotic resources within the adverts (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020) and can thus signify 'fact versus fiction, reality versus fantasy, real versus artificial, authentic versus fake' (van Leeuwen, 2005: 160). Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) list a variety of visual expressions related to judgments of visual modality; due to the limitation of space, the focus is placed on saturation, modulation, and brightness. The analysis of visual elements is further supported by the investigation of the textual resources used in the ads to show in truly multimodal ways how both text and visual elements work jointly in food ads to construct and reinforce ideals around femininity and masculinity.

Results

This section presents the main results of the analysis. It is organised into two subsections: Section 'Food and body types' reports findings from the content-analytic coding and classification of food types (Sample 1) and bodies (Sample 2) across the dataset, while Section 'Food "for her" and "for him"' presents results from a comparative multimodal analysis of selected foods advertised to female versus male audiences (Sample 3).

Food and body types

Figure 1 shows that WH and MH comprise similar food categories, which at first glance appears to suggest parity. However, when the distribution within each category is examined, considerable differences emerge regarding the food types targeting female vs male audiences. The most frequently advertised food type in WH is dairy, while protein dominates in food ads in MH. Since both dairy and protein play important roles in bodily health regardless of gender, this pattern suggests gendering effects: milk-based products are predominantly coded as feminine, whereas protein, strongly associated with muscle building, is coded as masculine. A closer look at the protein category shown in Table 3 below reveals further distinctions. Protein in MH is most often represented through meat, particularly red meat, and protein bars, whereas a large majority of the protein in WH comes from alternative protein sources such as protein bars and nuts.

While some meat advertising does appear in WH, it typically markets leaner and therefore 'healthier' types such as chicken and fish, consumption of which can be associated with the maintenance of slim bodies. Another marked difference concerns food for infants and children, which appears exclusively in WH. This reinforces the stereotypical representation of women as primary caregivers and food providers for children.

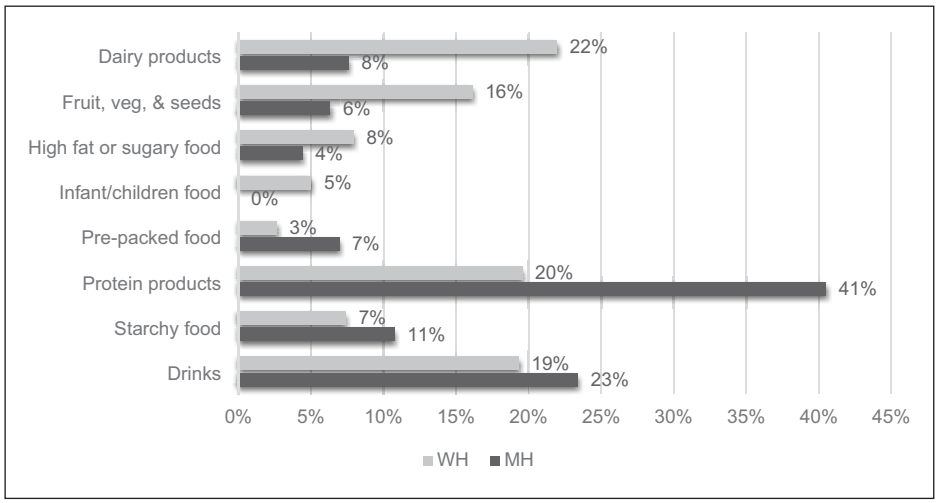

Figure 1. Regular food types in WH and MH.[1]
[1]The percentages within regular foods and food supplements were calculated as the proportion of each product type relative to the total number of foods within that category.

Table 3. Distribution of food within the top three regular food categories.

Food type	WH	MH
Dairy	Kefir/yogurt (*N* = 54; 65%); milk (*N* = 8; 10%); nutritional shakes (*N* = 5; 6%); ice cream (*N* = 7; 8%); vegan alt (*N* = 4; 5%); cheese (*N* = 3; 4%); butter (*N* = 1; 1%); misc. (*N* = 1; 1%)	Kefir/yogurt (*N* = 4; 33%); protein shakes (*N* = 4; 33%); ice cream (*N* = 3; 25%); milk (*N* = 1; 8%)
Protein	Nuts/nut butters/nut bars (*N* = 18; 24%); protein bars (*N* = 18; 24%); meat (*N* = 16; 22%); eggs (*N* = 14; 19%); pulses (*N* = 5; 7%); vegan alt. (*N* = 2; 3%); misc. (*N* = 1; 1%)	Meat (*N* = 25; 39%); protein bars (*N* = 20; 31%); nuts/nut butters/ nut bars (*N* = 15; 23%); vegan alt. (*N* = 2; 3%); eggs (*N* = 1; 2%); pulses (*N* = 1; 2%)
Protein: meat	Lean – chicken and fish (*N* = 7; 44%); red – beef and pork (*N* = 4; 25%); misc. (*N* = 5; 31%)	Red – beef (*N* = 10; 40%); lean – chicken and fish (*N* = 3; 12%); misc. (*N* = 12; 48%)
Drinks	Soft (*N* = 70; 96%); alcoholic (*N* = 3; 4%)	Soft (*N* = 22; 59%); alcoholic (*N* = 15; 41%)

With respect to drinks, Table 3 above demonstrates that only 4% of WH adverts feature alcoholic beverages, compared to 41% in MH. This gendered distribution reflects wider social attitudes in which alcohol consumption is constructed as both 'manly' and 'unfeminine' (Lemle and Mishkind, 1989). The relative emphasis on alcohol in MH, and its near absence in WH, despite both being health magazines, is particularly

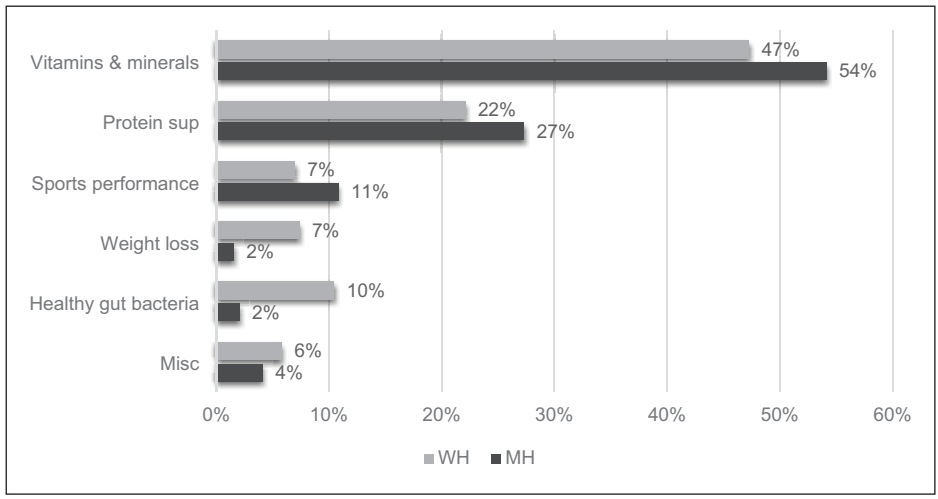

Figure 2. Food supplement types in WH and MH.

striking, suggesting that men have more leeway and can simultaneously engage in healthy and unhealthy practices, while women are expected to adhere more strictly to what is deemed healthy.

With respect to food supplements, Figure 2 shows that the types advertised are broadly similar across the two magazines. Yet here too, important gendering patterns emerge. For instance, supplements marketed for weight loss appear far more frequently in WH than in MH (see also Table 4 for a numerical comparison), reinforcing the persistent message that women must remain vigilant about their body weight. Such valorisation of thinness has long been equated with health and constructed as a marker of the healthy female body (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009). Another notable finding concerns gut supplements, which feature predominantly in WH (see Figure 2 and Table 4), implying that digestive issues are primarily a woman's concern, while they are rarely represented as problematic for men, as if men did not possess digestive tracts. The proportion of different types of food supplements across the two magazines demonstrate a near parity, a finding that might initially suggest a move toward de-gendering of this food category. However, a closer critical and multimodal scrutiny of the exact same food products including supplements advertised to female vs male audiences shows explicit and implicit gendering – something that we demonstrate in great detail in Section 'Food "for her" and "for him"' through a critical multimodal discourse analysis.

All food advertisements in the studied sample featured bodies. However, the systematic categorisation of body types revealed that the promoted foods endorse, and indeed compel, the pursuit of particular bodies for women and men. Starting with age, Figure 3 below shows that both categories of food adverts feature primarily youthful-looking female and male models, with youth identified in extant literature as a crucial component of the Western body ideal (e.g., Murnen, 2011; Rodin et al., 1984; Ringrow, 2016). Thus, regardless of the gender, the advertised food products impel their viewers to achieve the

Table 4. Numbers of food supplements in WH and MH.

Food supplement type	WH	MH
Vitamins and minerals	*N* = 122	*N* = 105
Protein supplements	*N* = 57	*N* = 53
Sports performance	*N* = 18	*N* = 21
Weight loss	*N* = 19	*N* = 3
Healthy gut bacteria	*N* = 27	*N* = 4
Misc	*N* = 15	*N* = 8

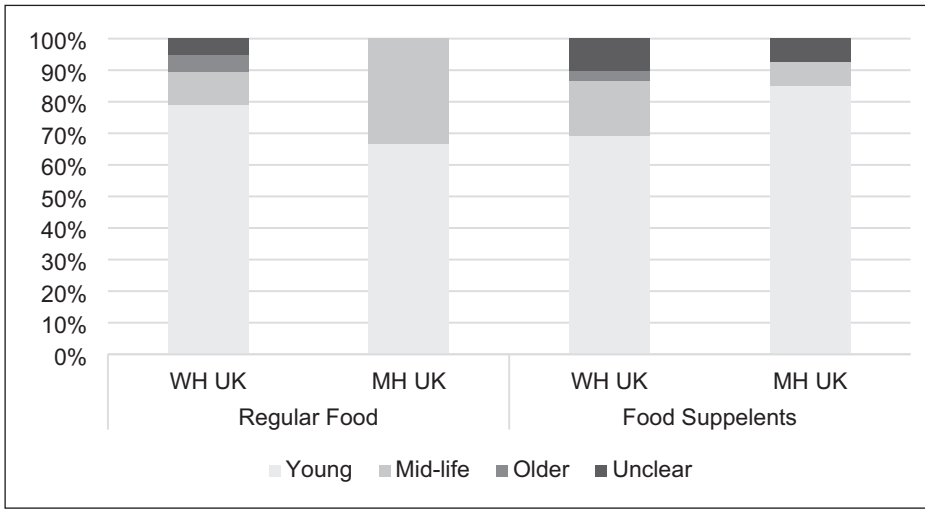

Figure 3. Age across food ads.

same young bodies. Nevertheless, some nuances emerge between the two categories. For example, regular food adverts in MH feature more mid-life individuals than those in WH, where women are portrayed mostly as young. In comparison, ads of food supplements display the opposite pattern. This asymmetry can be explained through a combination of societal gender norms and targeted marketing strategies. Food supplements, which are concentrated sources of vitamins and minerals intended to complement a healthy diet, are often promoted as remedies for external bodily 'problems'. This may explain the slightly higher number of older women depicted, who are frequently targeted with messages encouraging them to care for and reverse signs of ageing in areas such as skin, bones, or joints. In contrast, ads of food supplements in MH, many of which promote protein products, feature predominantly young men. This reflects marketing strategies that draw on cultural gendered associations between youthful male bodies and peak physical performance, ideals that are presented as desirable and achievable through the consumption of protein supplements.

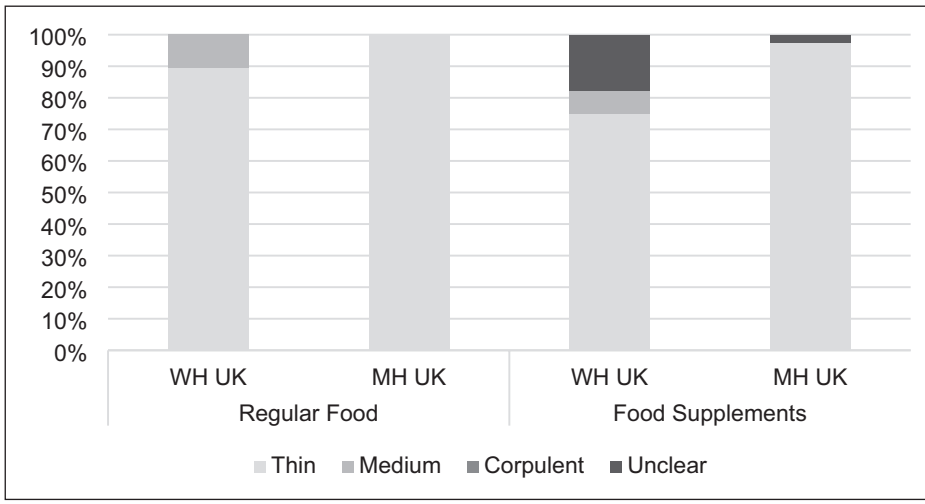

Figure 4. Adiposity across food ads.

As for adiposity, the majority of bodies featuring in both regular and food supplement adverts are low in body fat, with only a small number of medium-sized women identified (see Figure 4). While the prevalence of low adiposity in WH may be linked to the Western ideal of female body which valorises thinness, in MH, it can be linked to muscularity, as muscle development relies upon low levels of adiposity (Labre, 2005). This is reinforced in the identification of muscularity, which shows the prominence of a muscular body in both food and food supplement ads in MH (see Figure 5).

Another notable observation from the analysis of muscularity in Figure 5 is that WH adverts, particularly within the regular food category, also feature women with visible muscles. This finding suggests a shift in female representations, where women like men are now encouraged and expected to display some level of muscularity adding evidence that the new ideal 'strong is the new skinny' (Boepple et al., 2016) has entered the domain of food. However, this can also be interpreted as the imposition of masculine norms onto the female body. Since the thin body has not disappeared and continues to be highly valorised, as evidenced in Figure 5, women are increasingly pressured to achieve a body that is both slim and muscular. In Foucauldian terms (Foucault, 1988), this dual demand exemplifies a form of disciplinary power, whereby women's bodies are subjected to intensified 'double' regulation. This new regime requires not only continuous monitoring but also further optimisation, achieved through the disciplining of the body via intensive physical exercise, which now needs to be supported with specific food consumption such as proteins ideally in form of lean meat.

Food 'for her' and 'for him'

In this part of the analysis, we focus on selected food advertisements to examine more closely the semiotic choices employed and the extent to which these choices imbue food

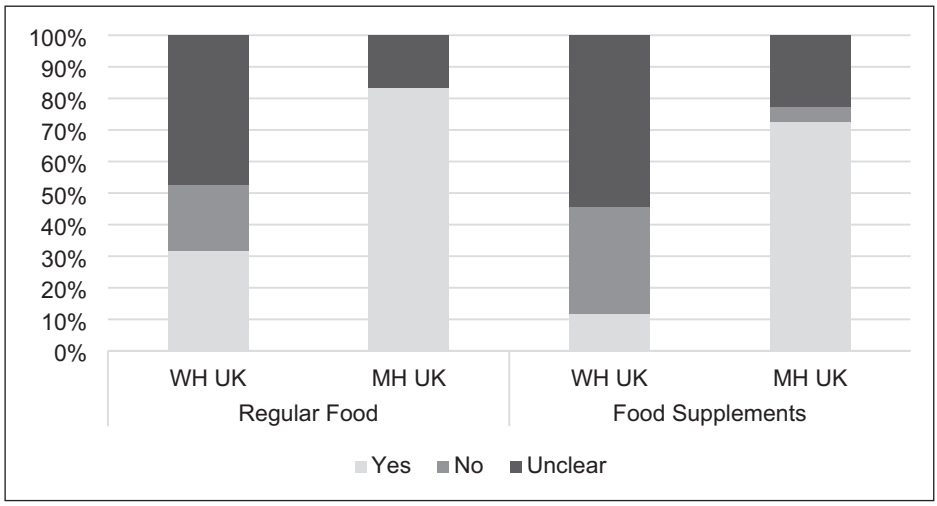

Figure 5. Muscularity across food ads.

with gendered meanings. We use a juxtaposition-based analytical procedure, comparing identical or near identical food products and semiotic choices used to market them to female vs male audiences. Given the prominence of dairy and protein identified in Section 'Food and body types', here we illustratively concentrate on a smaller sample of 6 ads (Sample 3) drawn from these two categories, encompassing both regular food items and supplements.

Although the food product advertised in the two ads in Figure 6 is the same, there are striking differences in the choices of semiotic means employed to represent the product to female vs male audiences. The most prominent difference is in the representation of activities performed by the participants. In the WH advert, the woman is depicted in a yoga pose reinforcing associations between femininity and gentler, mind-body practices. In comparison, the MH advert features a man on a snowboarding expedition, a sport that is not only more adventures than yoga but also more dangerous. These traits are further fixed as idealised through the use of monochromatic colour schemes, which, as Ledin and Machin (2020) note, are often used to evoke timelessness. Gaze and facial expressions are also different with the female participant gazing directly at her audience and her smiling expression creating a welcoming atmosphere and a sense of affinity with the audience (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020; Ledin and Machin, 2020). At the same time, the male participant is gazing off-frame prompting the viewer to see him as a thinking subject possibly fixed on his next adventure (cf. Machin and Mayr, 2012). Alongside the visual cues, the text reinforces the masculine narrative of risk and adventure. The ad in MH describes pistachios as essential 'for every ascent and adrenaline-fueled descent' as well as through the presence of 'an award winning' 'legendary snowboarder' and 'adventurer' Jeremy Jones. Juxtaposed with Jones, the female participant is nameless and thus becomes a generic example of a wellbeing-oriented woman. Gendering is also manifested through the large captions, with women recommended to consume pistachios out

Figure 6. Vegan protein food 'for her' and 'for him' (the image on the left is from WH, while the one on to right from MH).

of concern for the 'love' of their bodies thus linking femininity with emotions and self-care, while men contrarily as part of their 'gear' and thus a support for their adventures and risky physical activities.

In contrast to the pistachios advert, the second example illustrated in Figure 7 features both female and male well-known Team GB athletes, Katarina Johnson-Thompson and Adam Gemili. Despite their shared professional status and sporting fame, significant differences emerge in the ways in which the two sportspeople and the products – dairy-based desserts – are discursively represented. The MH advert emphasises Gemili's professional sport career by depicting him in his official Team GB clothing, which lends authenticity, professionalism and credibility. He is also shown in an embrace with a bear – a strong and dangerous animal. This portrayal may appear humorous at first glance, but the bear serves as a potent symbol of strength and dominance, qualities traditionally associated with hypermasculinity. This projection is further reinforced by Gemili's direct gaze and serious expression, signalling confidence and focus (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). In contrast, the *WH* advert presents Johnson-Thompson not as a professional athlete, but as a semi-fictional, fairy-tale-like figure drawing on mythologised imagery of ancient Greece, which in turn aligns with the advertised product being a 'Greek' style yogurt. Instead of sporting gear or references to competition, she is dressed in casual, revealing clothing, with loose hair, a tilted

Figure 7. Dairy food 'for her' and 'for him'.

head, and closed eyes – semiotic choices that together construct a subtly seductive pose. Her smiling expression and closed eyes can imply passivity and a degree of subordination unlike the direct gaze of Gemili, which conveys seriousness and professionalism. The only visual cue linking her to her physical strength is her muscularity, yet this is not put in any relation to her real athletic identity. In this way, the muscularity becomes just a decorative ad-on to the otherwise seductive and sensual appearance. As in the pistachios ads, the accompanying text reinforces these gendered representations; the word choices in the MH advert such as 'World Champion' and '4 × 100m relay' amplify sporting success. In contrast, the WH advert uses lexis describing emotions and pleasure such as 'luscious' and 'delicious' alongside descriptors such as 'light', '0 added sugar', and 'fat-free', which focus attention on weight control. Furthermore, these differing gendered aspects correspond to the type of dairy products carefully selected by advertisers to fit the stereotypical assumptions around female and male bodies, with fat-free lemon yogurt aimed at appearance-conscious women while high-carbohydrate rice pudding at men who are subsequently positioned as being allowed to eat anything they please (and yet remain in great physical shape).

Finally, we juxtaposed two adverts of the same protein supplement (see Figure 8). Here, too, stereotypical assumptions about masculine and feminine corporeality are emphasised though the choice of different semiotic resources. The WH advert uses a young model, light skin tone and long hair to foreground the model's youthfulness and thinness. The lower modulation of the image further intensifies the smooth, flawless, and idealised appearance of the general female body (Ledin and Machin, 2020). By contrast,

Figure 8. Protein supplements 'for her' and 'for him'.

the MH ad uses a model which can be classified as middle-aged and it foregrounds muscularity. The realness and therefore seriousness are accentuated through higher modulation (Ledin and Machin, 2020). Furthermore, selected poses also work to reinforce stereotypical depictions: the male body is shown engaged in a strenuous physical activity, while the female body is depicted in a yoga pose, which connotates calm and soothing atmosphere (cf. Ledin and Machin, 2018). Both adverts are decontextualised and feature indirect gazes, which encourage viewers to attend to the masculine and feminine bodies on display (Machin and Mayr, 2012). Colour too is used to reinforce binary distinctions: the stereotypical gender markers such as pink and blue are used to differentiate femininity (pink) from masculinity (blue) (Koller, 2008). Blue can also symbolise knowledge and science (Ledin and Machin, 2020), while pink is linked to other qualities stereotypically associated with femininity, such as softness thus reinforcing the connotation of calmness in the WH ad. Here, too, included language choices reinforce the binary gendering. Words such as 'muscle', 'strength', 'power' and 'endurance' were selected to accompany the muscular and active body image in the MH ad, while 'shape', 'weight-loss' and 'diet' feature in the WH ad directing readers' attention to the attainment of a slim body. Furthermore, the MH ad promises to enhance men's 'power and endurance', while the WH ad instead reassures women that the supplement will help them 'fight fatigue', implicitly suggesting that women are weaker and more prone to exhaustion. Finally, the MH advert employs the word 'fuel' in its headline, metaphorically framing

the male body as a machine or vehicle–powerful, technical, and complex, whereas the WH headline uses 'shape', reminding women of the importance of their exterior body.

Overall, the examples illustrate how ostensibly neutral and naturally sourced products such as pistachios, yogurt, and protein supplements become gendered on two interconnected levels. First, they are binarised through distinct visual choices such as different body poses, gazes, and settings that are employed to appeal to either female or male audiences. These differing choices evoke values and behaviours stereotypically associated with femininity (e.g., care, wellbeing, emotion, sensuality, seductiveness, and generality) and masculinity (e.g., risk-taking, physical strain, rationality, scientific authority, and sporting fame). Second, selected linguistic choices reinforce and stabilise these associations, thereby fixing the intended gendered constructions. In this way, food and its consumption not only become gendered but also serve *to do* gender. For women, pistachios, yogurt, and protein supplements are feminised to emphasise the importance of self-care, slimness, and emotional balance. For men, by contrast, these products are masculinised to symbolise risk-taking, adventure, physical endurance, and rational control. Notably, female athletic achievements are entirely erased, reducing women to muscular yet decorative figures situated within mythologised settings. The domain of athletic success is thus symbolically reserved for men, with pistachios and yogurt portrayed as instrumental to that success. Women, in contrast, are confined to a fantasy realm in which food is oriented toward appearance and sensual pleasure, rather than physical performance.

Discussion and conclusions

Returning to our initial concern with how seemingly trivial mass media sustain gendered and neoliberal ideologies, our analysis demonstrates that food advertising continues to reproduce stereotypical discourses of gender and body regulation. Through a content-analytical and multimodal critical scrutiny of food advertisements from *Women's Health* (WH) and *Men's Health* (MH), we have systematically identified both the macro and micro patterns of gendered representations. Three broad strategies could be identified. First, the analysis shows that food ads feature prominently in health and lifestyle magazines, confirming the growing role of food as yet another technology of physical and mental self-improvement in contemporary neoliberal society (cf. Foucault, 1988). Yet this role is portrayed as more relevant to women than to men: 25% of all adverts in WH were food ads, compared with only 16% in MH. Thus, alongside cosmetics and beauty products, women are now expected to devote greater attention to food consumption and to specific and 'right' kinds of food. Whereas food was once represented primarily in restrictive terms, it is now permitted, and can even be indulged, as long as it supports the development of the new stereotypical femininity, which, alongside thinness and youthfulness, now needs to have some muscles too.

The second strategy concerns the specific choices of food categories and types targeted at different gender audiences. Our content analysis shows that while the same food categories appear in both *Women's Health* (WH) and *Men's Health* (MH), they are advertised in different proportions. Foods typically coded as healthy such as dairy, fruit, and vegetables are advertised far more prominently in WH, whereas ads of protein,

associated with muscle building, appear with greater frequency in MH. Ads of certain food categories also occur exclusively, or almost exclusively, in one or the other magazine. For instance, food for children and infants is advertised only in WH, while adverts for red meat and alcohol are found predominantly in MH. A closer examination reveals that food is gendered not only at the level of category but also within categories. In the meat category, for example, red meat is almost exclusively marketed to men, while 'white', lean types such as chicken are promoted to women. A similar pattern emerges for protein: while protein adverts appear in both magazines, ads of non-meat protein sources have a much greater presence in WH.

All in all, the selection of food categories and the binarising within a category work to imbue food with qualities that are either associated with stereotypical femininity or masculinity. For women, the selection of healthy foods emphasises the imperative to maintain a healthy, youthful, slim, and now also muscular body. The inclusion of ads marketing food for children and non-meat protein further reminds women of both their traditional duties of caring for others, and their new ones, namely caring for the environment. Although this study has not explored in depth the relationship between food, sustainability, and femininity, research suggests that pro-environmental attitudes and practices are more readily associated with women (Brough et al., 2016). Thus, the increased presence of plant-based protein sources in WH reinforces the notion of environmental care as distinctively feminine domains. For men, the adverts and accompanying male bodies reassert the need to achieve and maintain muscularity. The inclusion of alcohol and red meat ads suggests that men, unlike women, are permitted to 'let go' and engage in consumption practices perceived as unhealthy. The simultaneous inclusion of protein supplements and muscular male bodies in both MH and WH might appear to signal a degree of gender parity, suggesting that empowerment, agency, and control are now for women too (cf. Bouvier and Chen, 2021a). Yet this can also be interpreted as an additional layer of disciplinary labour imposed on women: alongside caring for themselves, others, and the planet, they must now also cultivate visible strength and muscularity. In contemporary neoliberal culture, the female body remains under intensified scrutiny, not only through food in general, but through increasingly specific and moralised food choices.

The third dimension of gendering relates to the process of semiotisation, that is, selecting particular semiotic choices to imbue food with qualities that work to reinforce stereotypical gendered meanings. Across the three sets of advertisements, a consistent set of semiotic strategies emerges through which food is gendered and genders in the process. First, gender differentiation is achieved through activity type and bodily representation: women are repeatedly shown in more passive, self-reflective, or aestheticised poses, while men are depicted as either more dynamic in performance-oriented activities or dressed and positioned in settings that connotate this dynamism. Second, gaze and expression reinforce these contrasts too: direct, inviting gazes and smiling faces are used to depict women, which constructs femininity as relational and approachable, whereas off-frame gazes and serious expressions employed more often with men construct masculinity as autonomous and focused. Third, colour and composition anchor the visual gender binary further, with light palettes, pink and soft modulation for women connoting calmness and care, and darker, monochromatic or blue tones for men symbolising

strength and rational control. Fourth, linguistic choices complement and stabilise these visual gender meanings: words associated with emotions and self-care appear in the female-targeted ads, while those connoting performance, physicality, and mastery in the male-targeted ones. These strategies of semiotisation perform a dual function; they transform the same food product into a gendered sign (light and pleasurable for women, strong and functional for men), while simultaneously reinforcing rather than challenging the binary and stereotypical gender identities.

The present study supports previous scholarly observations that food has increasingly become a neoliberal technology for regulating and shaping the body (Datta and Chakraborty, 2018; Harjunen, 2017). We extend this discussion by adding a gender perspective, showing that food and food consumption operate simultaneously as gendered practices and practices of gendering – processes that work from the inside out to enhance the visible aspects of the female and male body in accordance with Western corporeal standards of 'beauty'. While the relationship between food and stereotypical hegemonic representations of femininity and masculinity has been documented in texts reproduced in WH and MH (Fuller et al., 2013), our analysis has extended it to the persuasive genre of advertising and to the visual domain linking food more systematically with representations of male and female bodies. This has allowed us to observe a shift in the representation of the female body from being solely thin to being both slim and muscular. Yet, these ideals remain narrowly defined and continue to promote body ideals that are difficult to attain. Such representations risk reinforcing body dissatisfaction and may contribute to unhealthy responses among both women and men, including anxiety, restrictive dieting, and the (over)consumption of weight-loss or protein supplements.

Our findings have important implications for the development of critical media literacy. The study provides a case example of how food is semiotised to produce gendered meanings in health and lifestyle media. Exploring such multimodal texts and the semiotic choices within as we have done in this study can help uncover and question the ideological messages embedded and perpetuated in seemingly 'trivial' everyday media. Cultivating this kind of critical and analytical awareness is essential for challenging the persistence of gendered and neoliberal discourses that can have harmful effects on how people perceive themselves and others. Future research could expand this work by examining how gendered and neoliberal discourses around food operate across digital and social media platforms, where algorithms and influencer marketing may further amplify or potentially reconfigure traditional gender binaries. In addition, cross-cultural media comparisons could provide valuable insights into the semiotisation of food beyond the UK context, revealing how gendered and neoliberal ideologies circulate, adapt, or perhaps encounter resistance in different cultural settings (cf. Bouvier and Chen, 2021b).

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