

CRAZY, SEXY, SALTY

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This billboard advertising Pretzel Crisps outside of San Francisco is the four-year-old brainchild of Snack Factory LLC and a younger sibling of New York Style Bagel Chips (Kelleher). The campaign is pushing a redesigned, pale blue package and new cursive logo. The text in the ad—“We’re thin and stacked . . . so lose the old bag”—plays on a description of the pretzels, which are “thin” and “stacked” in a pile, and the idea of men leaving their wives (“old bags”) for skinny women with big breasts. The ad was released after the original campaign slogan, “You can never be too thin,” became the subject of a passionate media outcry, with one New York City citizen memorably defacing a bus-stop ad to point out that “Actually, you can” (Mastrangelo).

After the first campaign, Pretzel Crisps’ Vice President of Marketing, Perry Abbenante, issued this tenuous apology:

We hope people noticed what isn’t in the ads: No extra thin, scantily clad female models; No mention of dieting programs, points, etc. . . . We in no way advocate unhealthy weight loss or want to promote a bad body image. We appreciate your feedback and apologize if the ad offended people. We are listening to feedback and making some adjustments to the campaign. (Mastrangelo)

In defending his company’s ad strategy, Abbenante pointed to an important absence in both the original and redesigned advertisements: people. There are no “scantily clad

models”—or even a haggard “old bag”—in the image, yet their presence is evoked by the text. Through the miracle of ad copy, Pretzel Crisps’ customers were asked to regard two aluminum foil packages as human beings.

Surely the marketers weren’t trying to bait their critics, but at the very least they hugely misunderstood (or maybe willfully ignored) the complaint. Pretzel Crisps’ method of addressing the media crisis was to swap an irresponsibly pro-anorexic slogan for an ad that was blatantly misogynistic—perhaps whoever designed the ads didn’t think so, and that’s what’s so bewildering. In both campaigns, consumers were asked to accept a distorted version of gender in which thinness and sexiness were presented as successful versions of femaleness, implying that anything else was undesirable, and worse, in the case of the “thin and stacked” campaign, disposable. We can assume that the company thought this campaign would sell chips to the largest number of potential consumers, which indicates a belief on the part of Snack Factory LLC that both men and women are amused by the ad. But why would anyone find it funny?

To laugh at the billboard is, I think, to acknowledge an understanding of, and implicit participation in, the dichotomy between two widely accepted female stereotypes: the sex kitten and the frigid hag. Neither is an accurate representation of true female identity, whatever that is. Yet, many women hold a deep desire to be the former and an intense fear of becoming the latter. In her book *Gender Trouble*, feminist philosopher Judith Butler articulates the problem of socially imposed gender norms (like the sex kitten and the hag) as “ideal morphological constraints [placed] upon the human such that those who fail to approximate the norm are . . . condemned to a death within life” (xxi). For Butler, “death within life” refers not only to physical violence and death, but a life limited by social expectations. The sex kitten and the old bag summoned (though not bodily present) in the Pretzel Crisps billboard can be treated as examples of Butler’s “ideal morphological constraints”: both are culturally crafted images, or “morphologies,” of extreme femaleness that manipulate how real women evaluate their worth. The assumption contained in both Pretzel Crisps advertisements is that consumers operate in the cultural space contained within the borders of the sex kitten and the old bag.

In the preface of her book, Butler coins the term “mundane violence” to describe cultural norms that place limits not only on how we live, but also on how we perceive ourselves (Butler xxi). The “mundane violence” that the billboard commits is the public reinforcement of two absurd versions of female identity, and by extension, the notion that one identity is preferable to the other. Between the lines of the ad copy, customers are asked to buy into a worldview that elevates men, who are presented as the arbiters of the transaction (egged-on by the prompt “lose the old bag,” i.e., “leave your wife—unless, of course, she’s ‘thin and stacked’”), and degrades women to the status of mere options—choose version “a” or “b.” For the woman, neither version of the female offers satisfaction, but inevitably leads to failure: the sex kitten presents

an unrealistic feminine ideal, and the old bag is dehumanization made manifest, both the package and the woman it represents portrayed as throwaways.

According to Butler, consumers' participation in this socially constructed framework of gender necessitates an element of "performance":

[A]cts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle or identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (185)

Butler develops her central argument—that people perform gender—around the idea that actions and gestures endlessly mimic notions of sexual identity that are themselves "fabrications," or social constructs. Thus, there is no original gender, only artificial reproductions of what culture teaches us is properly "woman" and "man." The three distinct performances of gender acted out in the moment of a consumer viewing Pretzel Crisps' "thin and stacked" billboard are: first, the personal performance of a female consumer invited to become more exaggeratedly feminine by purchasing a snack food, and second, the performance of a male consumer encouraged to see himself as more virile by choosing to "lose the old bag."

The third act is the concerted performance of Pretzel Crisps as a corporate personality attempting to create a brand identity based on skinniness and sexiness, thereby performing gender on a public, rather than personal, scale. Even the specifics of its more feminine logo and packaging—the softer pastel colors, the swooping cursive font—prompt the idea that a corporation, like an individual, might craft a particular gender identity. Each creates a more desirable identity through what Butler calls "acts and gestures": a woman is expected to want to be thin and stacked, so the company assumes she will buy chips advertised to have those qualities. Her gender act is the purchase of slender, sexy chips. Likewise, Pretzel Crisps tries to merge its brand identity with ideas about health and attractiveness, so its act is creating a logo (and complementary campaign) that connect ideal feminine qualities to its product.

Butler's claim that gender performance is an infinitely mimicked and culturally reproduced act lacking a true original closely resembles Wendy Doniger's argument that individuals have no single "self," but rather an abiding sense of identity that arises from a collection of "masks" that we alternate putting on and taking off (Butler 188; Doniger 69). In her essay "Many Masks, Many Selves," Doniger argues that we are "driven to self-impersonation through the pressure of public expectations" (60). "Self-impersonation"—like gender imitation in Butler's *Gender Trouble*—is a vehicle through which we construct "masks," or affected identities constructed to address specific

cultural assumptions and expectations. A logo is analogous to Doniger's concept of a mask: it is a crafted, produced identity. Pretzel Crisps might be seen as the corporate embodiment of Doniger's fluid concept of identity, an ever-changing, self-promoting new campaign, the way an individual adopts a new mask for a particular situation. As such, the billboard can be perceived as an enormous declaration of the cultural expectations upon which individuals base their crafted gender identities, or masks.

Branding and advertising are synonymous with mask-making: they are methods through which corporations appropriate cultural norms, the way individuals acquire them via masks. Of course, truly talented advertisers do not just reflect these norms—they manipulate them. Gifted marketing executives understand not just the statistical details of their target consumers, but also something of their psychology. They know how to manipulate desires, fears, and insecurities to elicit a specific response—that is, how to motivate a customer to buy their product. Because ads are designed to appeal to the largest number of potential customers, they are a convenient way to examine what culture—here embodied by advertising executives acting the role of cultural experts—defines as normal and good. The ad copy reveals a set of assumptions not just about sexuality and gender, but also of goodness: “thin” and “stacked” are not just desirable traits, they are human virtues. Thin and beautiful are normal and good, and unattractive and disposable are abnormal and bad. By developing a campaign that pits these two contrasting versions of female identity against each other, Pretzel Crisps' advertisers are appealing both to women's desire to be sexually attractive (the “good” manifested in “thinness” and “stacked-ness”), and inversely, to their fear of abandonment should they fail to live up to the skinny, sexy standard. The purchase of Pretzel Crisps becomes a kind of gender insurance: we are made to believe that by eating sexy chips, we guarantee our most successfully female selves.

The very same ideas of good and normal that Pretzel Crisps promotes in its campaign influence the re-creation of its corporate identity. The decision to use a cursive, pastel-colored logo is likely motivated by the same ideas of genderized “goodness” that the company imposes on the customer with its “thin and stacked” campaign. The new logo is designed to address the perceived desires of its customer—specifically, that the brand appear to be healthy and attractive. The relationship, then, between consumer and corporation may be seen as one of mimesis, each recreating in itself the traits (what Butler would call the “acts” and “gestures”) that the other determines are desirable. Pretzel Crisps' feminized logo and accompanying campaign are meant to render the brand softer and more appealing to customers in the precisely the same manner that its billboard suggests customers become more appealing by eating their chips. To convey the imitative nature of the relationship in Doniger's terms, Pretzel Crisps is the ever-changing self, its logo and ad campaigns composing a multiplicity of masks that affect not only customers' brand perception, but Pretzel Crisps' perception of itself. Pretzel Crisps reinvented itself as a lighter, more feminine

brand, and, in turn, its customers were asked to see themselves as lighter, more feminine versions of themselves.

A massive billboard over the highway is like an enchanted cultural mirror: in it, we see ourselves at our best—our teeth whiter, our cars bigger, our waists smaller. One might even say that the entire business of advertising is based on this urgent need to mimic, or reproduce in ourselves whatever qualities or products are deemed “best”—an urge Doniger might identify as our need for infinite “self-imitation” (62). Because we have been trained through the viewing of millions and billions of advertisements and logos in the course of a lifetime and to like or dislike who we see in the mirror, we assume others also prefer this more flattering version. And so we buy things. At this most basic level of consumer psychology, we buy something in an effort to be liked: “we simply choose the mask that matches the mask of the person we’re trying to please,” writes Doniger. “[W]e project what we regard as our best self to the world” (67). In the case of the Pretzel Crisps ad, the assumption being made is that a woman’s “best self” is “thin and stacked,” and her worst is old and forgettable. The billboard asks us to believe that by eating Pretzel Crisps, we ingest these flattering traits and assimilate them into our selves.

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