

FirstName LastName

Professor Brian Goldfarb, TA Yi Hong Sim

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Extended Communication Analysis Project: Part 3

Over the course of the last ten weeks, the New York-based monthly publication *Real Simple* has been my object of study. The Time Inc. owned magazine acts as a guidebook for its 8.1 million readers, with content focused on life simplification for the “modern woman” (*Real Simple* Media Kit). The cover feature of the February 2014 issue of *Real Simple* is titled “Super Bowls,” and through previous analysis of the connotative meanings of the spread, exemplifies discourses of simplicity while maintaining the dominant ideology’s construction of gender roles. One of the most compelling questions I have regarding the magazine includes, how has *Real Simple* changed over the course of the last fourteen years of its existence? For example, in “Super Bowls,” I noticed an emphasis on the freshness and nutrition of the meal described. Does the emphasis on freshness stay constant throughout *Real Simple*’s evolution? Has *Real Simple* always focused on the caloric value of their recipes or was there a certain point in time where a health craze began? In addition, I observed that the contents of the February 2014 magazine were topics that the female gender is constructed to be fond of. Since 90% of readers are women, are *Real Simple* articles coded to speak specifically to a female audience? In order to substantiate these questions, it is important to note that scholars in this field have observed changes in women’s magazines over time. In *Understanding Women’s Magazines: Publishing, Markets and Readership*, author Anna Gough Yates writes that “from the late 1960s...the rise of the women’s movement brought with it a growth in magazine coverage of political issues, including those

previously dismissed as unacceptably ‘feminist’” (Yates 10). Furthermore, in Jack DeMarest and Jeanette Garner’s *The Representation of Women’s Roles in Women’s Magazines Over the Past 30 Years*, the authors argue that “a thematic content analysis performed on a sample of articles published in *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* ...revealed a gradual decline...in themes of women as wives, mothers and homemakers and an increase in articles with political, social and economic themes” (DeMarest 357). As evidenced in Yates’ piece as well as DeMarest and Garner’s piece, changes in the real world brought changes to the content in women’s magazines. According to these two works, women’s magazines increased coverage of political, social and economic themes, while distancing themselves from content that maintained the dominant ideology of traditional gender roles.

In order to answer the questions I have regarding *Real Simple*, I have formulated a methodology to analyze my inquiries. Since *Real Simple* was founded in 2000 and publishes a 180-page issue monthly, there are 159 issues in existence as of March 2014. Out of these 159 issues, my proposal would entail taking approximately half of the issues, examining their table of contents and selecting articles for further quantitative analysis. Therefore, I would be working with a set of 80 issues of *Real Simple*. To choose the 80 issues, all of the years ending with an even number (i.e. 2000, 2002, etc.), will see issues from the even numbered months (i.e. February (2), April (4)) included in the data set while all of the years ending with an odd number (i.e. 2001, 2003) will see issues from the odd numbered months (i.e. January (1), March (3)) included in the data set. This selection of issues represents the majority of *Real Simple* issues. First, I would look at the *Real Simple* Table of Contents, traditionally located within the first 15 pages of the magazine and separated by advertisements. *Real Simple*’s Table of Contents is divided into various sections, which include beauty, fashion, health, money, family, food and

more (*Real Simple* Table of Contents 14). Based on my denotative and connotative analysis of the February 2014 article “Super Bowls,” I wanted to explore the question, how has *Real Simple* changed over the course of the last fourteen years of its existence? In order to quantitatively answer this question, I would look at articles that fall under the “food” sector of the table of contents. I would scan one “food” article –likely the first article under the sector– in each of the 80 issues and look for the existence of prominent emphasis of the following categories in the article: freshness, speed/quickness, health, female references in either the article or through a female celebrity and deliciousness/taste of food. I would place a check mark in a column for every category that the article encapsulates. For freshness, I would rely on visual design language in regards to the types of food that the editors choose to show. For example, an abundance of greens, natural ingredients, a noticeable lack of processed foods or uses of the word “fresh” or “natural” all support the categorization of an article emphasizing freshness. An article with an emphasis on cooking leftover foods or using canned foods in a more efficient way would not fall under this category. Next, with the category of speed and efficiency, there should be definite time and/or descriptive words connoting speed (i.e. fast, quick, instant) attached to the recipe. In addition, clues that the article could fall under the health category include an emphasis on the low number of calories a meal boasts, use of words connoting “healthy” (i.e. nutritious, nourishing), descriptive phrases that suggest that the meal is good for the body (i.e. “lowers your cholesterol”) or mentions of the specific vitamins and minerals a certain meal includes. Next, for the female references category, if a recipe is featured from a female celebrity, the magazine visits a female celebrity’s kitchen or if there are phrases like in “her” kitchen, or an emphasis on cooking for husbands and families, the recipe can be seen as coded to speak to females. Finally, articles that fall under the category of deliciousness and taste can include articles with a connoted

disregard for health. For example, articles that focus on indulgent desserts, a hearty Thanksgiving dinner or the best tasting steaks can be included in the category. After putting each of the 80 articles in the categories it belongs to, I would plot all of my data to create five line graphs (one per category) where I could then analyze the results of the study. Based on the increasing, decreasing, fluctuating or plateauing slopes of the line graphs, I can deduce how the topics and content of *Real Simple*'s food section has changed over the course of the last fourteen years. For instance, if the number of articles in the deliciousness/taste of food category steadily decreases over time and the number of articles in the health category steadily increases, I might be able to conclude that *Real Simple*'s focus in terms of food articles has shifted from an emphasis on taste and indulgence to a focus on nutritious, calorie conscious foods. In addition, if the number of articles in the freshness category as well as articles in the health categories both increased, one could argue that the significance of healthy eating and natural ingredients increased with the passing of time. Next, if the number of articles with a reference to speed and quickness increased over time, this could indicate how the definition of the "modern woman" has changed, in this case, *Real Simple* could be acknowledging that women are getting busier and busier. Finally, the number of articles with references to females could either bolster or undermine *Real Simple*'s acknowledgement of their 90% female readership.

Works Cited

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