

Spring 2019

A rhetoric of coupons: Analyzing FSIs and FSI coupons through rhetorical lenses

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A Rhetoric of Coupons:
Analyzing FSIs and FSI Coupons through Rhetorical Lenses

Blake Lubinski

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

School of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication

May 2019

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my grandmother for helping me form my initial interest in coupons and to my mother for inadvertently leading me to rediscover it many years later.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the people who supported the completion of this thesis.

Thank you to S. Scott Lunsford for acting as my chair. You struck the perfect balance between offering guidance and showing patience, helping me prepare for each step of this undertaking and work through my challenges along the way. Your thoughtful feedback on my drafts also inspired me to think more critically about my writing to improve my precision not only in this thesis but in other pieces, as well.

Thank you to Jen Almjeld and Angela Crow for serving as my readers. Your invaluable expertise and suggestions provided me with many directions for developing my ideas and exploring new ones.

Thank you to Lori Beth De Hertogh for assigning the project that evolved into this thesis. Your consistent encouragement strengthened my confidence in coupons as a topic worth studying from a rhetorical point of view.

Thank you to Chris Taormino for being a part of this process. You helped me in more ways than I can count: organizing my 811 coupons, listening to me talk through ideas until they made sense, and playing video games with me when I needed a break, just to name a few. Without you, I would not be able to push myself as much as I do.

Finally, thank you to anyone else who supported the completion of this thesis. Your name might not appear here, but your contributions are still very meaningful.

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Abstract

This thesis consists of two journal articles that examine newspaper coupon booklets called free-standing inserts (FSIs) through feminist and visual rhetoric lenses. The first article attempts to identify the “ideal couponer,” or the audience suggested by the product categories, visuals, and language appearing in FSIs. Through content and textual analyses using a feminist rhetoric lens, the article argues that FSIs evoke the idea of an audience of mothers who conform to gendered cultural assumptions about womanhood and parenthood. The article concludes with theoretical and business implications of these findings, contending that more rhetorical research is necessary to understand how FSIs reinforce social stereotypes and can improve current marketing efforts.

The second article analyzes the materiality of FSI coupons and the act of FSI couponing to determine the degree to which they support the preservation and reclamation of domestic narratives. The article suggests that FSI coupons and couponing reinforce domestic narratives about women as homemakers, crafters, and planners, among others. It also proposes that FSI coupons and couponing enable reclamations of the value of crafting and the accessibility of participating in business. When combined, the first and second articles aim to lay a foundation for a rhetoric of coupons.

Introduction

This thesis is inspired by my experiences with coupons. Some of my earliest memories involve clipping coupons with my grandmother. In almost all of them, my grandmother sits in a reclining chair with a small stack of free-standing inserts (FSIs), or coupon booklets found in newspapers, in her lap. A few inches in front of her, I sit on the living room carpet with a pair of scissors between my hands and my grandmother's purse beside me. As my grandmother flips through the pages of the FSIs, I wait eagerly for her to hand me one. The wait likely feels longer than it actually lasts, but eventually, my grandmother passes me a page. She tells me which coupon to clip, and I do not hesitate to start. Watching the scissors quickly cut along the dotted lines, my grandmother likely warns me to slow down or be careful, but I do not hear her. Instead, I focus on the coupon until I place it in my grandmother's purse, set aside the rest of the page, and begin waiting eagerly again for another coupon to clip.

As easy as it is to reduce these memories to a common series of events, I am not bothered by their repetitiveness. In fact, I participate in a similar routine today. Every Sunday morning, I drive to the convenience store down the street from where I live, pick up a copy of the newspaper, and return home to begin clipping coupons. Like my grandmother, I hold the FSIs in my lap as I flip through the pages. Yet, without a helper like my childhood self sitting at my feet, I clip the coupons on my own, my excitement just as strong as it was back then.

Still, my enthusiasm for coupons has changed over the years. As a child, I enjoyed clipping coupons because it allowed me to bond with my grandmother. I also liked feeling that my efforts helped her save money. When my grandmother passed while

I was in middle school, however, I stopped clipping coupons. Certainly, I could have continued: although I did not make many purchases at that time, my mother did. I also knew that my mother struggled financially; coupons could have helped relieve some of the strain that she experienced. Yet, this idea occurred to me only when I was preparing to move out of her home for graduate school. Because I had concentrated only on the fact of my mother's financial situation—not the details, such as her role as a single parent raising four children, that surrounded it—I feared that I would not be able to afford basic necessities even while working two part-time jobs. I thus decided to start clipping coupons again—though, this time, only as a safeguard. After more than a year of gathering them from apps, websites, and FSIs, I realized that I did not have to rely on coupons to be able to buy the items that I needed. By that time, however, I had already created a hobby out of using coupons to see how little I could pay for products. I chose to continue clipping coupons.

When I was preparing to pick a thesis topic shortly thereafter, my fluctuating relationship with coupons during the last fifteen-odd years was still on my mind. Although I attributed shifts to the external events in my life, I wondered about the complexities that might exist in coupons themselves. I determined that I would look for them in FSIs and FSI coupons as a homage to my earliest encounters.

As I conducted my preliminary background research, I found that little existing literature analyzes coupons—and, more specifically, FSIs and their coupons—from a rhetorical point of view. Thus, in addition to drawing on advertising and marketing findings about coupons to inform my work, I adopted grounded theory as my methodology. Judith A. Holton describes grounded theory as an approach involving a

“‘staying open’ stance” (iii), or a willingness to allow investigative findings to dictate the direction of research. This methodology was appropriate because of the lack of existing literature mentioned earlier. However, to limit the scope of my findings, I viewed them through feminist and visual rhetoric lenses. While I initially chose these lenses because I did not have experience with them but was interested in learning more about them, they ultimately proved to be well suited to my research topic, as discussed more later.

My thesis takes the form of two academic journal articles. I opted for this format over a traditional thesis because I sought to gain practice with writing for scholarly publications. This experience will be beneficial if I apply to doctoral programs and instructor positions for rhetoric and composition in the future. Although I have been considering this education and career path during the last several years, I am also open to pursuing other opportunities related to rhetoric and composition. In those cases, my articles will still be relevant because they will expand my writing portfolio and illustrate my ability to adapt to different rhetorical situations.

My first article is called “Identifying the ‘Ideal Couponer’: An Examination of Audience in FSIs.” In it, I analyze the product categories, visuals, and language in FSI advertisements to suggest that FSIs evoke the idea of an intended audience comprising mothers who conform to gendered cultural assumptions about womanhood and parenthood. As mentioned earlier, I reached this conclusion by examining my data through feminist and visual rhetoric lenses. These lenses complemented my analysis not only because women are often considered to be primarily responsible for household purchases but also because FSI advertisements are highly visual, incorporating bright colors and large images, among other elements.

I wrote my first article for *enculturation*, an online journal that is “devoted to contemporary theories of rhetoric, writing, and culture, and invites submissions on rhetoric, composition, media, technology, and education” (“About Enculturation” par. 1). I chose this journal because of its interest in the intersection of rhetoric and culture. Particularly because I aimed to identify the ideal couponer, I expected that I would consider issues such as gender, heteronormativity, and race, all of which overlap with culture. However, in addition to aligning my research topic with the journal’s areas of focus, I needed to adapt my writing to its requirements and conventions. To do so, I reviewed the journal’s submission criteria and read several of its previously published articles. According to the submission criteria, articles should range between 6,000 and 8,000 words and follow MLA citation standards (“Submission & Review Guidelines” par. 2). When reading the previously published articles, I also noticed that they often draw on the traditional article structure involving a literature review and a discussion of methods, among other elements. The journal’s website supports this observation, explaining that *enculturation* “keeps the traditional feel and usability of the print journal with issues, tables of contents, and articles” (“About Enculturation” par. 1). Moreover, although the journal’s website does not directly address whether submissions can contain marketing materials due to copyright permissions and other concerns, I found a few articles that include either images of or scripts from advertisements. Certainly, the images in my first article slightly differ from these examples because they also feature coupons; however, because the coupons have expired, they do not retain any monetary value. By adhering to the journal’s requirements and conventions, then, my first article is better positioned to be published in it.

My second article is titled “Preservation and Reclamation: Examining Domestic Narratives in FSI Coupons.” Building on my first article’s claim that FSIs project the idea of an intended audience of mothers, I contend in this one that FSI coupons contribute to the perpetuation and reclamation of domestic narratives related to homemaking, crafting, and more. As in my first article, I advance this argument by viewing the coupons through feminist and visual rhetoric lenses. These lenses supported my analysis again because women are traditionally assumed to clip most coupons and coupons contain multiple distinctive visuals, such as product images and clipping paths.

Although I initially considered writing my second article for *enculturation* due to its similar focus on rhetoric and culture, I ultimately decided to prepare it for another publication. I made this choice in part to challenge myself to adapt to the expectations of a second publication. I also believed that two articles tailored for two different publications would add more variety to my writing portfolio. As a result, the publication that I selected for my second article was *Present Tense: A Journal of Rhetoric in Society*. Like *enculturation*, *Present Tense* is an online journal that publishes pieces adhering to MLA citation guidelines (“Submissions” par. 1). It also does not specify whether submissions can contain marketing materials but has published several articles that do. Because of these observations, I followed MLA citation rules and showed images of only expired coupons in my second article as I had done in my first article. However, *Present Tense* and, thus, my second article are unique because of their other characteristics. For example, *Present Tense* seeks works on the relationships between people and the world, including “Popular culture and media analysis” and “Rhetorics of Everyday Life and Technology” (“Submissions” par. 9), the two sample submission areas that best fit my

research topic. It also asks that articles span between 2,000 and 2,500 words (“Submissions” par. 5).

To learn more about the articles that *Present Tense* accepts, I read several that had been published in it much as I had done when planning to write my first article. I found that many of the articles deviate from the traditional structure explained earlier, opting instead for a more free-form essay organization. I adopted this format in my second article by limiting the discussion of my methods and creating original section titles, among other ways. I also aimed to write short paragraphs to reflect a trend that I noticed in some of the articles and comply with the journal’s interest in supporting online reading (“Submissions” par. 11). By incorporating these criteria and observations, my second article is more likely to fit into *Present Tense*.

My two articles appear in order after this introduction. After my second article, I include a conclusion reflecting on this thesis and the future.

Identifying the “Ideal Couponer”: An Examination of Audience in FSIs

As a couponer, I look forward to waking up early on Sundays and picking up a copy of the newspaper, the largest source of print coupons. Inside each newspaper, there could be as many as five free-standing inserts (FSIs), or coupon booklets, containing at least a dozen coupons apiece. Yet, as I thumb through the pages of each FSI, I usually stop to clip only a few coupons. Placing those coupons into my wallet to redeem later, I set the others aside in a basket or on my desk in case I want to return to them. However, I rarely ever do.

My experiences with print coupons do not appear to be unique. In 2017, manufacturers and retailers used FSIs to distribute approximately 274.5 billion coupons for consumer packaged goods (CPGs), such as food, beverages, and cosmetics. Yet, consumers redeemed only about 852.8 million of these coupons (Brown). This difference results in a redemption rate of 0.3 percent, perhaps prompting some to wonder whether consumers are choosing to use digital coupons over FSI ones. Certainly, such an idea seems plausible given general trends toward digitalization; however, further statistics provide only minor support. Consumers in 2017 redeemed approximately 375.8 million digital coupons, less than half the number of FSI coupons. Granted, manufacturers and retailers issued fewer digital coupons—about 3.8 billion—but the percentage used still amounts to a low 9.9 percent (Brown).

Marketing researchers have advanced several theories for the discrepancy between the distribution and redemption of FSI coupons. Clark et al. contend that consumers must exhibit strong interests in paying low prices, maximizing the value of their purchases, and engaging in the act of couponing (203). By contrast, Aradhna

Krishna and Robert W. Shoemaker suggest that consumers must only perceive the face value, or the amount of savings listed on a coupon, as adequately large (454). Moreover, Sarah Spiekermann et al. find that consumers prioritize their proximity to the places where they can use coupons (283).

From a rhetorical point of view, however, these explanations consider the idea of audience from only the consumer's perspective as addressed (Ede and Lunsford 167). This limited scope thus raises two questions about audience from the angle of FSIs. First, who is the "ideal couponer," or the audience suggested by the product categories, visuals, and language featured in FSIs? Second, how closely does this audience resemble the population of the areas where the FSIs are distributed?

To attempt to answer these questions, I will first review existing literature related to FSIs and feminist rhetoric, the latter being the lens through which I will ultimately interpret my own findings. I will then analyze the FSIs included in eight Sunday editions of *The News Leader*, a medium-circulation newspaper issued daily throughout central Virginia. My examination will consist of two phases. In the first phase, I will conduct a content analysis of the product categories featured in the FSIs. In the second phase, I will complete a textual analysis of the FSIs' visuals and language. By combining my observations across these two phases, I will argue that the ideal couponers are mothers who conform to gendered cultural assumptions about womanhood and parenthood.

Literature Review

FSIs

FSIs have existed for almost 50 years. In 1972, George Valassis produced the first FSIs with an emphasis on coupons for cents off purchases of CPGs (“Valassis Communications, Inc.” par. 3). Since then, FSIs have expanded to have not only more advertisements but also more booklets. Today, between two and five FSI booklets appear in most Sunday newspapers. The booklets may be from General Mills, Proctor & Gamble, RetailMeNot Everyday, or SmartSource. While General Mills and Proctor & Gamble FSIs feature only products from these parent companies, RetailMeNot Everyday and SmartSource FSIs include a variety of name brands (“Sunday Paper Coupons” par. 4-5).

Despite the growth of FSI coupons and advertisements, relevant scholarship is limited. Regarding audiences, James P. Winter and William F. DeGeorge report interview findings that women clip more FSI coupons than men (30). This observation would seem to support the traditional view that women buy most household goods (Witkowski 109) and exemplify the fact that consumer purchases by women amount to between 70 and 80 percent of the total each year (King par. 7). Yet, Winter and DeGeorge clarify that the difference between women and men in regular FSI coupon clipping is relatively small. Whereas 61 percent of women in their sample regularly clip FSI coupons, 57 percent of men do (Winter and DeGeorge 30). More recent research upholds this breakdown, revealing that 62 percent of women and 58 percent of men obtain most of their coupons through direct mail and newspapers, the latter being the means for distributing FSIs (“Women Clip Most Coupons” par. 2). Still, although women

and men might clip FSI coupons in near-equal proportions, are they both the intended audience? In other words, do FSIs include product categories, visuals, and language meant to speak to both sexes? To what other personal characteristics do FSIs appeal? Because of the lack of existing answers to these questions, my content and textual analyses will aim to offer some insight.

Feminist Rhetoric

While feminist rhetoric is rich with interpretations and nuances, my approach to the methodology concentrates on the work of a few scholars. According to Gesa E. Kirsch and Jacqueline J. Royster, feminist rhetoric developed in the 1980s out of an effort for “rescue, recovery, and (re)inscription” (4). Expounding on this idea, Patricia Bizzell states: “scholars felt that it was important simply to rescue women rhetors from historical obscurity and insert them into the rhetorical canon” (ix). Since then, feminist rhetoric has evolved to focus less on binary gender and more on power. As Michaela D. E. Meyer explains, feminist rhetoric now involves “writing women in” and “challenging rhetorical standards” (2). She adds that it also extends to “reflexive analysis and critique of any kind of symbol use that orients people in relation to other people, places, and practices on the basis of gendered realities or gendered cultural assumptions” (3). Put more simply, feminist rhetoric today is concerned with the extent to which inclusivity and gendered cultural assumptions are embraced and rejected.

Although scholars have not applied this interpretation of feminist rhetoric to FSIs, they have done so to advertisements from different time periods. In a study on recent Dove advertisements, Dara Persis Murray recognizes inclusivity in the way that women

with a variety of body types are pictured. However, she also argues that the advertisements undermine this sense of inclusivity through ballot-like boxes containing choices such as “oversized” and “outstanding” that are apparently mutually exclusive (qtd. 92). Along similar lines, E. Michele Ramsey notices that gendered cultural assumptions are both reflected and challenged in automobile advertisements from *Ladies’ Home Journal* between 1910 and 1920. She notices that several advertisements appear to disregard women’s traditional roles as housewives by marketing cars to them. Yet, Ramsey insists that the advertisements maintain women’s inferiority by showing men in the driver’s seats (98). These complex displays of inclusivity and gendered cultural assumptions thus raise questions about the depictions that I might find when viewing FSIs through a feminist rhetoric lens. Specifically, how do FSIs use visuals and language to embrace and reject inclusivity and gendered cultural assumptions? What effect do FSI coupons—tangible calls to action accompanying FSI advertisements—have on these concerns?

Methods

Sample

As mentioned earlier, my sample comprises FSIs included in Sunday editions of *The News Leader*. I chose FSIs from this newspaper as a convenience sample because I currently live in central Virginia for graduate school. I collected FSIs for eight consecutive weeks, beginning on Sunday, September 23, 2018, and ending on Sunday, November 11, 2018. This period allowed me to complete my dataset before the winter holiday season, when FSIs are sometimes omitted from newspapers.

Each newspaper that I gathered held between two and four FSIs, resulting in 20 in all. Each FSI featured between five and 35 spreads, or layouts with an advertisement and at least one coupon. While the FSIs also contained several advertisements without coupons, I decided to concentrate on the spreads to explore how they construct their audiences as couponers. In total, the 20 FSIs included 405 spreads and 811 coupons (see table 1).

Table 1
Data Collection Per Week

Week	Date	FSIs	Spreads	Coupons
1	September 23	2	38	73
2	September 30	4	89	192
3	October 7	2	42	85
4	October 14	2	42	104
5	October 21	2	25	39
6	October 28	3	53	105
7	November 4	3	66	105
8	November 11	2	50	108
Totals		20	405	811

Data Recording and Coding

Each week, I logged the new FSIs that I collected in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

Initially, I recorded only the following basic information: week number, date, number of FSIs, FSI name, number of spreads per FSI, and number of coupons per FSI. After I finished gathering my sample, I coded the individual FSI spreads based on the following categories: brand, product category, and themes. Especially as I coded the FSI spreads for

product category and themes, the former of which I discuss more in the next subsection, I used a grounded theory approach. This approach allowed me to develop my understanding of the FSI spreads more inductively given the little research on FSIs. While a grounded theory approach can sometimes result in discrepant coding, I aimed to reduce this possibility by completing this task at once rather than after each week. I also reviewed my coding after finishing it to ensure consistency.

Data Analysis

As stated earlier, I analyzed my data in two phases. In the first phase, I identified the product category promoted in each FSI spread. I used the following traditional CPG categories from Ed Soehnel as a starting point: baby; beer, wine, and spirits; beverages; bread and bakery; breakfast and cereal; canned goods and soups; cleaning supplies; condiments, spices, and baking; cookies, snacks, and candy; dairy, eggs, and cheese; deli and signature café; flowers; frozen foods; grains, pasta, and sides; international cuisine; meat and seafood; miscellaneous (e.g., gift cards, gift wrap, batteries, etc.); paper products; pet care; pharmacy; produce; and tobacco. While Soehnel combines health, beauty, and personal care products into a single category, I separated them before incorporating them into the list above. I did so because research has shown that hair care, eye care treatment, and cosmetics are among the products most commonly featured in FSIs (Mielach par. 3), meaning that a category containing all of them could be significantly larger than the other categories. I also believed that dividing these categories would allow them to be more precisely defined. I regarded items like bandages and over-the-counter medicines as health products, makeup and nail polish as beauty products, and

shampoo and toothpaste as personal care products. Furthermore, I added other categories as necessary to account for businesses that sometimes appear in FSIs.

In the second phase of my examination, I conducted a textual analysis according to Barbara B. Stern's three-step process. The first step, "*identification*," involves determining what visuals and language are used in the artifacts under consideration. The second step, "*construction of a provisional meaning*," entails relating observations from the first step to existing conventions and tropes. Finally, the third step, "*deconstruction of meaning*," requires reconciling findings in the second step with cultural assumptions (Stern 62). To limit my analysis in the last step, I viewed the conventions and tropes that I found in the FSI spreads through a feminist rhetoric lens.

Findings

Product Categories

The products featured in the FSI spreads fall into 25 categories. In addition to 23 CPG categories adopted or adapted from Soehnel's list, the products include items from home improvement stores and restaurants (see table 2).

Table 2
Number of FSI Spreads Per Product Category

Product Category	Number of FSI Spreads
Baby	3
Beauty	21
Beer, wine, spirits	0
Beverages	13
Bread and bakery	1
Breakfast and cereal	4
Canned goods and soups	14
Cleaning supplies	30

Condiments, spices, and baking	21
Cookies, snacks, and candy	27
Dairy, eggs, and cheese	10
Deli and signature café	1
Flowers	0
Frozen foods	11
Grains, pasta, and sides	5
Health	75
Home	2
International cuisine	1
Meat and seafood	8
Miscellaneous	9
Paper products	13
Personal care	115
Pet care	10
Pharmacy	0
Produce	1
Restaurant	10
Tobacco	0

To be sure, categorizing the FSI spreads by the products appearing in them presented some challenges. As discussed earlier, perceptions vary about what constitutes beauty, health, and personal care products. Although I defined my view of these product categories before conducting my analysis, I recognize that my interpretation might differ from that of others, particularly the manufacturers and advertisers who created the FSI spreads.

Furthermore, some of the products shown in the FSI spreads could belong to more than one category. For example, one FSI spread promotes products by InnovAsian, a brand of frozen international cuisine (see figure 1). While the categories that I adopted from Soehnel consist of ones for frozen foods and international cuisine, there is not a

combined frozen international cuisine category. Rather than create one, I classified the FSI spread according to the product category that seems most salient in it: international cuisine. I will return to this idea of salience later when I examine the language and visuals used in the FSI spreads. However, it is worth noting that this classification contributes to the diversity of the product categories represented in the FSI spreads, another topic that I will discuss more in depth later.

The image displays two manufacturer coupons at the top. The left coupon offers \$1.00 off any one (1) InnovAsian® 9oz item, with a barcode and the number 0695119-040218. The right coupon offers \$2.50 off any two (2) InnovAsian® items, with a barcode and the number 0695119-040219. Below the coupons is a large advertisement for InnovAsian. The ad features a bowl of chicken and rice with the slogan "MEALS FOR ONE SO MUCH TO CRAVE, NOTHING TO SHARE". It also highlights "8 NEW FLAVORS!" and includes a seal that says "NO ANTIBIOTICS EVER". The InnovAsian logo is prominently displayed at the top of the ad.

Figure 1. InnovAsian FSI Spread. SmartSource, 28 Oct. 2018.

The appearance of products from different categories in the same FSI spread generated a third challenge. Although most FSI spreads concentrate on a product or a group of products in the same category, some do not. For instance, one FSI spread promotes Ziploc, Pledge, Windex, Scrubbing Bubbles, Glade, and fantastik products. While Pledge, Windex, Scrubbing Bubbles, and fantastik are generally viewed as cleaning supplies brands, Ziploc and Glade offer more miscellaneous products, such as storage containers and air fresheners. Certainly, these items might support cleaning, but they differ from the disinfectants associated with the other brands. To categorize this FSI spread, then, I again considered which product category appears to be more emphasized in it. I concluded that the cleaning supplies are more numerous and classified the FSI spread accordingly. Of the 405 FSI spreads in my sample, I determined that 11 feature products from different categories.

These challenges aside, the FSIs' intended audience begins to become clearer given the product categories that are and are not represented in them. Much as previous research indicates that hair care, eye care treatment, and cosmetics appear most commonly in FSI spreads, personal care, health, and beauty rank among the top product categories in my sample. In fact, more than a quarter of the FSI spreads promote personal care products, and when combined with those for health and beauty products, these FSI spreads account for more than half of the total. This fraction is significant less for what it suggests about personal care, health, and beauty products but more for how it compares to other product categories. Since most people use personal care and health products, it is unsurprising that they outnumber other categories in the FSI spreads. At a basic level, this larger relevance ensures a broad audience.

Yet, the abundance of FSI spreads for personal care, health, and beauty products starkly contrasts with the lack for the following categories: beer, wine, and spirits; flowers; pharmacy; and tobacco. While FSI spreads for alcoholic beverages are restricted to certain locations (“Kantar Media Reports” par. 12), the RetailMeNot Everyday and SmartSource websites do not identify those areas or indicate that there are limitations on the other product categories. To be sure, these product categories might appear in other FSIs distributed at another time or in a different region, a possibility that I will discuss more later. For now, however, this apparent omission seems to imply that the intended audience of FSIs issued in my sample area is consumers who do not purchase these products. This suggestion is notable considering that I collected my sample in the weeks leading up to the winter holiday season, a time when people are likely to purchase alcoholic beverages for social gatherings. Furthermore, the number of pharmaceutical promotions in media such as television has increased significantly in recent years (Kaufman par. 5), rendering their absence in FSIs striking. Thus, whereas the inclusion of personal care, health, and beauty products initially seems to widen the FSIs’ intended audience, the exclusion of other product categories subsequently appears to narrow it.

Along similar lines, the product categories found only rarely in the FSI spreads also help limit the intended audience. The following product categories occur only once in my sample: bread and bakery, deli and signature café, international cuisine, and produce. Since bread and bakery, deli and signature café, and produce items are often based more on a retailer or local level, their frequency understandably differs from other CPGs created by national manufacturers. However, international cuisine is different. As illustrated through the InnovAsian example earlier, international cuisine can take the

form of widely distributed CPGs. This fact is important, especially given rising consumer demand for international cuisine at food retailers. While research on this increase concentrates on multicultural consumers, it also extends to others (Aronson; Crawford). The overall lack of FSI spreads for international cuisine thus suggests that such consumers do not constitute the FSIs' intended audience.

Finally, the product categories for specialized items further define the FSIs' intended audience. As mentioned earlier, my sample does not include FSI spreads for items in the following product categories: beer, wine, and spirits; flowers; pharmacy; and tobacco. However, it does contain FSI spreads for these specialized categories: baby, home, restaurant, and pet care. Compared to the presence or absence of more general product categories such as cleaning supplies and produce, these product categories reveal more about the identity and lifestyle of the FSIs' intended audience. For instance, the baby product category implies that the intended audience likely comprises people who raise children, an idea that I will develop in the next section of my analysis. With FSI spreads for stores like Sherwin-Williams, the home product category suggests that the intended audience might own homes. Similarly, the pet care product category supports the idea that the intended audience could have pets.

By contrast, the restaurant product category seems to advance a few possible intended audiences. On a surface level, the intended audience would appear to be individuals who eat at restaurants. Ten FSI spreads expand upon this assumption by promoting mid-priced, family-friendly chain restaurants. However, these FSI spreads also feature Cold Stone, an establishment more than 50 miles from where I collected my sample. Although some parts of the FSIs' circulation area are closer to 30 miles from

Cold Stone, this distance still seems large enough to argue that the intended audience not only visits mid-priced, family-friendly chain restaurants but also travels moderate distances. Combined with my other observations about the product categories in the FSI spreads, this conclusion informs the rest of my examination of the FSIs' intended audience in the next subsection.

Visuals and Language

Building on my impressions of the intended audience in the last subsection, I will also analyze the visuals and language found in specific FSI spreads. To summarize, I made the following observations about the intended audience based on the product categories that are and are not represented in my sample:

- Does not buy beer, wine, and spirits; flowers; pharmaceuticals; or tobacco
- Is not highly interested in international cuisine
- Owns a home
- Raises children
- Has pets
- Visits mid-priced, family-friendly chain restaurants
- Travels moderate distances

I now aim to determine how the FSI spreads' visuals and language develop these perceptions. As mentioned earlier, I will view the visuals and language through a feminist rhetoric lens. More specifically and per Kirsch, Royster, and Meyer, I will evaluate the extent to which the visuals and language reflect inclusivity and reinscribe gendered cultural assumptions.

To return to my observation that the intended audience might raise children, I concentrate first on FSI spreads that seem to suggest this idea through visuals and language. Of the 405 FSI spreads in my sample, 13 reinforce this impression through images of adults interacting with children in typically parental ways, such as cooking and hugging. This fraction is significant given that consumers are more likely to clip FSI coupons when the accompanying advertisements focus on images of or information about the promoted products (Leclerc and Little 479). A total of 364 FSI spreads in my sample take this approach, usually placing the products or details about them in highly prominent positions, such as the top left corner—where Western users are accustomed to begin reading—and the center. Many of these FSI spreads also contain neutral- or contrasting-colored backgrounds to render the product images and information more salient. By contrast, 41 FSI spreads apply these strategies to people and pets, constructing narratives about the individuals and animals who purchase and use the advertised products. Since this number includes the FSI spreads featuring adults interacting with children, 28 potentially portray other identities. To be sure, the absence of children does not eliminate the possibility that the people in an FSI spread are parents, but the presence of them more strongly supports this idea. That is to say, parents are still parents even when they do not accompany their children. Parents would thus seem to be the FSIs' intended audience.

Through closer analysis, however, the FSIs' intended audience becomes narrower. Of the 13 FSI spreads depicting adults interacting with children, 12 portray women. An FSI spread for Fleischmann's yeast provides a representative example (see figure 2). In it, a woman and a child make cinnamon rolls. Presumably, the woman is the child's mother: they not only participate in a typical family activity but also look alike. In addition to

wearing similar blue and gray clothing, they both have blond hair and fair skin. These resemblances are likely not coincidental. Although the FSI spreads do reflect some diversity, it is still limited. For example, while several FSI spreads feature people of different races, only one shows an interracial family. This FSI spread also happens to be among the few that include the word “family” in their copy, perhaps suggesting that this relationship might not be recognizable without it. From a feminist rhetoric point of view, this possibility presents a setback to inclusivity, particularly because the other FSI spreads tend to communicate the idea of family through only their models’ affectionate actions and similar appearances. Indeed, the Fleischmann’s yeast FSI spread not only exemplifies this trend through its visuals but also reinforces it in its copy. An excerpt of the copy states: “Bake it yourself.” Since this text uses the second-person point of view, it necessarily addresses the couponer. Yet, before the couponer can accept this message, he or she must be able to imagine the task as feasible. The FSI spread makes this conceptualization easiest for the female couponer with children: it portrays a woman and her daughter already attempting the challenge. By picturing mothers acting in ways promoted to couponers, then, the FSI spreads evoke the idea of a similar intended audience.

MANUFACTURER'S COUPON EXPIRATION DATE: 12/29/2018

Reproduction, alteration, transfer or sale of this coupon or its contents is prohibited and is a criminal offense.

Save \$0.40
when you buy any ONE (1)
Fleischmann's® Yeast product

0040100-209646

CONSUMER: Limit one coupon per purchase/household and only on specified product(s). Any other use constitutes fraud. Valid only in the U.S. Coupon void if reproduced, sold, auctioned, transferred, used to purchase product for resale, or where prohibited/regulating by law or taxed. Consumer must pay sales tax.

RETAILER: ACH Food Companies, Inc. CMS Dept. 61720, 1 Fawcett Dr. Del Rio, TX 78840 will reimburse face value plus 8¢ if redeemed by authorized retail distributors and if submitted in compliance with ACH's redemption policy, available upon request. Cash value 1/100 of 1¢. Proof of purchase of sufficient merchandise to cover coupon submitted must be shown on request. ©2018 ACH Food Companies, Inc.

*making smiles
from start to finish*

**Fleischmann's® Pumpkin
Cinnamon Rolls**

Find joy in this and every recipe on breadworld.com

©2018 ACH Food Companies, Inc. FLEISCHMANN'S is a registered trademark of AB Mauri Food Inc. Used under license.

Bake it Yourself

Figure 2. Fleischmann's FSI Spread. *SmartSource*, 4 Nov. 2018.

The single FSI spread involving a man interacting with a child supports this intended audience (see figure 3). In the FSI spread for Palmolive dish soap, the man and a child are making dinner. The man is angled away from the camera and the couponer but toward the child, presumably his daughter. As in the last FSI spread, this one suggests this relationship through the models' interactions and appearances. Specifically, the models participate in another typical family activity as well as share similar hair colors and skin tones. Yet, unlike the man, the child becomes one of the FSI spread's focal points because she is turned toward the camera and the couponer. Although other FSI spreads picture adults looking away and children facing forward, this one is notable for the way that the man's actions reinforce his de-emphasized position. To revise an earlier statement, the man is not so much making dinner as supporting the child as she does it. Rather than stir for or with the child, the man allows the child to hold the spoon by

herself, even as she creates a mess. From a feminist rhetoric point of view, this choice both increases the child's agency and reinscribes the gendered cultural assumption that females cook. It also moves the man further into the background.

**MAKE DINNER
MAKE MEMORIES**
LET PALMOLIVE® HANDLE THE MESS

**3X
MORE FOAM™**
vs. Palmolive® Essential Clean™

Ultra Palmolive
ULTRA STRENGTH
Instantly Cuts-Through Grease
Tough on Grease. Soft on Hands.
Dish Liquid

MANUFACTURER'S COUPON EXPIRES 10/13/2018
SAVE 25¢
On any Palmolive®
Ultra Dish Liquid
(20.0 oz or larger)

0035000-047234

MANUFACTURER'S COUPON EXPIRES 10/13/2018
SAVE 50¢
On any Palmolive®
Ultra Dish Liquid
(32.5 oz or larger)

0035000-047237

CONSUMER LIMIT: ONE (1) COUPON PER PURCHASE OF PRODUCT AND QUANTITY STATED. No more than four (4) identical coupons for the same product in the same day. Do not send this coupon to Colgate-Palmolive Company, Attention: Consumer Affairs, P.O. Box 2000, One World Plaza, New York, NY 10108. Retailer must pay any sales tax. RETAILER: Colgate-Palmolive Company will reimburse the face value plus 70¢ handling if submitted in accordance with our Redemption Policy. P.O. Box 880007, El Paso, TX 78858-0007. Cash Value 1/100¢. No cash back if coupon value exceeds selling price. Coupon may not be bought, reproduced, altered, transferred, or otherwise used for any purpose other than its intended group prior to store redemption. Valid only in the USA. Not Valid in Puerto Rico. Redeemable at Food, Drug, Discount and other Stores accepting coupons.

*with added grease. Applies to Palmolive® Ultra Strength™ and Palmolive® Ultra Oxy™ Power Degreaser.

Figure 3. Palmolive FSI Spread. *SmartSource*, 30 Sept. 2018.

The copy that accompanies this image reinforces the man's secondary role. It says: "Make dinner. Make memories. Let Palmolive handle the mess" (punctuation added). Since the words "Make" and "Let" as used here are often considered to be in the second-person imperative form, it is unclear at whom they aim. Certainly, they could be directed at the child because she exercises the greatest agency in making dinner. However, this possibility is unlikely given that few children would be in the market for dish soap, a requisite for the rest of the FSI spread to have meaning. Instead, it appears more likely that the words "Make" and "Let" are in the plural second-person imperative form, addressing not only the man and child in the FSI spread but also the couponer. This

conclusion necessarily raises the question of what relationship the couponer has to the man and the child. While the couponer might see him or herself portrayed by the man, this impression is unlikely intended because of the man's de-emphasized position. To be sure, the man's appearance in the image likely serves to portray him as an engaged father. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the child looks at the couponer, her eyes and mouth opened wide with excitement. For the child to express such enthusiasm even as she diverts her attention from making dinner, it would seem likely that the couponer represents a loved one entering the kitchen. On this condition alone, the potential for the intended audience to include individuals besides mothers would still appear to be intact. Indeed, scholars have already begun identifying the ways that mass media increasingly challenge heteronormativity and traditional family structures (Dhaenens; Mazur and Emmers-Sommer). Yet, because the FSI spreads in my sample tend to feature what look like heterosexual relationships and traditional family structures, this FSI spread would be an outlier for its ability to accommodate other possibilities.

The assertion that the FSI spreads in my sample reflect heteronormativity warrants further attention. In stating that the FSI spreads do not recognize non-heterosexual relationships, I generalize about two related trends in my sample. First, the FSI spreads seem to feature only cisgender people. To be sure, gender identities are separate from physical appearances. In other words, an individual may identify as one or more genders and then appear in a way that differs from all of them. In the FSI spreads, however, this fact appears to be overlooked. While most of the FSI spreads do not use gendered pronouns, this omission seems to result less from a consciousness of diverse gender identities and more from an awareness of best advertising practices. Indeed,

research has found that consumers respond most favorably to promotions in the second-person point of view (Chang; Debevec and Romeo), the perspective taken in the majority of the FSI spreads. The remaining FSI spreads tend to bypass pronouns altogether, forgoing opportunities to communicate inclusivity through gender-neutral pronouns, such as singular they and ze.

Furthermore, the FSI spreads also opt for simple stereotypes when the choice of visuals could illustrate the complexity of gender identities. An FSI spread for Revlon can serve as an example (see figure 4). The FSI spread shows Gal Gadot wearing products from Revlon's Colorstay makeup line. As a well-known cisgender woman, Gadot reinforces the common stereotype that cosmetics are gendered products intended only for females. From a feminist rhetoric point of view, this portrayal undermines inclusivity by neglecting not only the other gender identities that could be interested in cosmetics but also the ones that already use these products. Although my analysis so far has suggested that these individuals are likely not the FSIs' intended audience, their absence still has consequences. In the Revlon FSI spread, for instance, the couponer must imagine herself or her daughter—not her son or another child with a different gender identity—into the presented narrative. By limiting the gender identities that can fit into their narratives, then, this and other FSI spreads project heteronormativity.

Fall Beauty

REVLON

UP TO \$6⁰⁰ OFF



Gal Gadot is wearing Revlon ColorStay™ Makeup in True Beige

Life Tested

REVLON ColorStay™

Meet the life-proof makeup that stays impeccable all day, for whatever life throws your way.

Lightweight, comfortable and lasts up to 24 hours.

Available in 35 shades.

UP TO 24 HOURS



PRIME, CONCEAL & SET ALL DAY

NEW



\$3 OFF

Revlon Face Powder, Highlighter, Blush, Primer or Concealer

REVLON
revlon.com



MANUFACTURER'S COUPON EXPIRATION DATE: 11/11/18

Consumer: Limit one coupon per purchase. Any other use constitutes fraud. Retailer: Revlon will redeem this coupon for face value plus 8¢ handling. Redemption signifies compliance with Revlon coupon policy (RCP) incorporated herein by reference. Policy available upon request. Void if reproduced or where prohibited, taxed or restricted. Cash Value 1/20¢. Mail coupon to: Revlon Cons. Prod. Corp. 197 NCH Marketing Services P.O. Box 880001 El Paso, TX 88588-0001 ©2018 Revlon Consumer Products Corporation

030997-049292



\$3 OFF

ANY Revlon Foundation

REVLON
revlon.com



MANUFACTURER'S COUPON EXPIRATION DATE: 11/11/18

Consumer: Limit one coupon per purchase. Any other use constitutes fraud. Retailer: Revlon will redeem this coupon for face value plus 8¢ handling. Redemption signifies compliance with Revlon coupon policy (RCP) incorporated herein by reference. Policy available upon request. Void if reproduced or where prohibited, taxed or restricted. Cash Value 1/20¢. Mail coupon to: Revlon Cons. Prod. Corp. 197 NCH Marketing Services P.O. Box 880001 El Paso, TX 88588-0001 ©2018 Revlon Consumer Products Corporation

030997-049291



Figure 4. Revlon FSI Spread. SmartSource, 14 Oct. 2018.

Along similar lines, the FSI spreads also convey heteronormativity through the romantic relationships captured in them. As stated earlier, gender identities do not need to conform to expectations for physical appearances. However, without indication that a person's gender identity and physical appearance do not align, others might reasonably assume that they do. Since the FSI spreads in my sample lack suggestions of otherwise, all five of the ones featuring romantic partners appear to show heterosexual couples. In addition, many other FSI spreads seem to depict heterosexual relationships through the language that they use. For example, an FSI spread for AXE products contains the following copy: "Add freshness to his stocking. Save on a gift you'll be glad he's wearing" (see figure 5). Similar to the FSI spreads for Fleischmann's yeast and Palmolive dish soap discussed before, this one directly addresses the couponer through the second-person point of view. Yet, it also includes two masculine pronouns: his and he. Since other scholars have already examined the feminist implications of gendered products (Kaygan et al.; Reich et al.), I will concentrate on the heteronormative consequences of the pronouns employed to gender the products. Given my earlier conclusion that the FSIs' intended audience is women, these pronouns would appear to refer to the couponer's male partner. This observation in turn implies that the couponer is not only heterosexual but also in a heterosexual relationship. In this way, FSI spreads like this one narrow the FSIs' intended audience at the same time that they exhibit heteronormativity.

ADD FRESHNESS TO HIS STOCKING.

SAVE ON A GIFT YOU'LL BE GLAD HE'S WEARING

MANUFACTURER'S COUPON | EXPIRES 12/2/18

SAVE \$1.00
on any ONE (1) AXE
Antiperspirant/Deodorant Stick
or Body Spray product (excludes
twin packs, gift packs and trial
and travel sizes).

Consumer: (AND) ONE (1) COUPON PER PURCHASE
on **antiperspirant/**
deodorant stick and body spray
product and **ANY OTHER**
OF THE SAME IDENTICAL
COUPON offered in
some shopping lists. Valid
to purchase proceeds
for resale or while
prohibited, regulated
by law. **Coupon value may**
not exceed value of item
purchase. NO CASH BACK.
Consumer pays sales tax.
 Redeemable at participating
retail stores, valid only in the
U.S. **NOT VALID IN PUERTO**
RICO. Referee: Unilever
Inc., 1373 N. Market
Square, P.O. Box 100000,
Dallas, TX 75205-0001
will reimburse the face value
of this coupon, plus 5¢, if
submitted in accordance
with our reader's mail policy.
Available upon request. Cash
value 1/100th of 1¢. Any use
of this coupon not approved
by Unilever is prohibited. ©2018 Unilever. XUS18008

0079400-111093

Unilever

Figure 5. AXE FSI Spread. *RetailMeNot Everyday*, 4 Nov. 2018.

Finally, to complete my examination of their visuals and language, the FSI spreads project the idea of an intended audience with a specific diet and lifestyle. As mentioned during my analysis of the product categories found in the FSI spreads, the intended audience is unlikely to eat international cuisine but likely to travel moderate distances. The visuals and language build on this foundation in FSI spreads such as one for Sargento cheese (see figure 6). In it, a woman carries a child, a diaper bag, and a handbag up a flight of stairs. On every other stair, there is a food item and a grams measurement. On the first stair, there are two eggs labeled six grams. On the next stair, there are some nuts also tagged as six grams. On the third stair, there is a spoonful of peanut butter marked as seven grams. Then, on the last stair, there is a cheese stick identified as eight grams. In addition to these images, the FSI spread contains the following copy: “Power through your day. The proof is in the protein.” From this text, it is clear that the grams measurements indicate the amount of protein in each food.

POWER THROUGH YOUR DAY.
THE PROOF IS IN THE PROTEIN.

6g
7g
8g

WE'RE REAL CHEESE PEOPLE™

MANUFACTURER'S COUPON
EXPIRES 12/16/2018

SAVE 75¢
on ANY ONE (1)
Sargento® String or
Stick Cheese

UP TO 8g PROTEIN IN EVERY SERVING

CONSUMER: Limit one coupon per purchase. Void if copied, sold, exchanged or transferred. Consumer is responsible for any sales tax. **RETAILER:** Sargento Foods Inc. will reimburse you the face value plus 8¢ handling if submitted in compliance with its Coupon Redemption Policy (available upon request). This coupon is subject to the terms and conditions of such Coupon Redemption Policy. Cash value 1/100¢. Mail to: Sargento Foods Inc., 24, NCH Marketing Services, P.O. Box 880001, El Paso, TX 88588-0001. ©2018 Sargento Foods Inc. All Rights Reserved.

0046100-027939

Figure 6. Sargento FSI Spread. *SmartSource*, 23 Sept. 2018.

Because the woman has passed the first three foods and is stepping toward the cheese stick, she seemingly aims to maximize her protein intake. While this goal—and the fact that it can be achieved with Sargento cheese sticks—appears to be the FSI spread’s central message, the image also communicates other information about the woman. By choosing the cheese stick, for instance, the woman reveals that she eats dairy products and, thus, is not vegan. Other FSI spreads for products such as eggs and chicken expand upon this portrayal, indicating that the intended audience is neither vegan or vegetarian. Combined with the woman’s other characteristics discussed earlier, these details paint the intended audience as interested in protein-rich foods to support a busy life. The FSI spread’s copy reinforces this depiction through its use of the second-person point of view. As explained before, this perspective directly addresses couponers to place them into FSI spreads’ narratives. In this case, the possessive pronoun “your” in “Power

through your day” locates the intended audience in the woman’s busy life shown in the FSI spread.

Still, even as the FSI spread’s language seems to recognize the daily demands on its intended audience, its visuals make this acknowledgement in a limited way from a feminist rhetoric point of view. As mentioned earlier, the woman holds a child. While the woman could be the child’s mother or sitter, this FSI spread effectively appeals to its intended audience insofar as the woman represents a caretaker. However, this portrayal neglects the woman’s other identities, such as an employee, an athlete, or others that might apply. These additional roles would certainly benefit from a protein-rich diet; yet, because this FSI spread concentrates on only one, it might exclude women who define themselves by their other identities. It also reinforces the stereotype that a woman’s primary role in society is being a caretaker.

Discussion

By examining the product categories, visuals, and language appearing in FSIs over eight weeks, I aimed to identify characteristics of the ideal couponer, or the intended audience projected by FSIs. To summarize my findings from the two phases of my analysis, I drew the following conclusions about the intended audience:

- Is a mother raising children
- Is in a heterosexual relationship
- Owns a home
- Has pets
- Leads a busy life

- Travels moderate distances
- Visits mid-priced, family-friendly chain restaurants
- Does not follow vegan or vegetarian diets
- Seeks protein-rich foods
- Is not highly interested in international cuisine
- Does not buy beer, wine, and spirits; flowers; pharmaceuticals; or tobacco

I also viewed the visuals and language used in specific FSI spreads through a feminist rhetoric lens to explore any consequences that they might have for inclusivity and gendered cultural assumptions. In the next two subsections, I expand upon my analysis by describing its theoretical and business implications. In a third subsection thereafter, I discuss a few limitations of my examination and opportunities for future research.

Theoretical Implications

Because of the lack of scholarship on FSIs, my analysis sets a foundation for viewing them as material for rhetorical study. As my examination illustrates, the FSIs evoke common rhetorical concepts, such as audience and point of view. They also engage these ideas in frequently similar ways, enabling studies of FSIs at the spread level and as a whole. This kind of research notably differs from that on advertisements, even when both are approached rhetorically. Whether placed in a magazine, bundled into a commercial break, or prepared for another medium, advertisements are usually selected for the specific context in which they will appear. That is to say, they tend to be chosen based on assumptions about the audience that will read a magazine or watch a television program; advertisements themselves generally do not create their own audiences. This situation

might seem to vary online, where advertisements are not necessarily picked for certain websites. Often in those cases, the advertisements are targeted, meaning that they are determined by users' browsing histories. In a way, one might say that the audiences of these advertisements are also borrowed: from the websites on which viewers see them.

By contrast, FSIs appear to generate more of their own audiences. Although FSIs are distributed through Sunday newspapers, many couponers—including myself—purchase the newspapers primarily for the FSIs inside of them. In fact, research by the Media Insight Project indicates that 12 percent of all newspaper subscriptions are motivated by promotions and discounts, including coupons. While this statistic might seem low, it is worth noting that the study involved a variety of participants, not only couponers. In addition, the Media Insight Project reports that 52 percent of the participants used the FSI coupons inside the newspapers once subscribed (“Paths to Subscription”). In this way, the FSI coupons might appear to create audiences as the magazine and television program do: by borrowing—in this case, from newspapers. However, their inherent relationships to the advertisements that accompany them complicate this connection. At the same time that couponers seek coupons to save money, FSI advertisements must persuade those couponers to spend their money on products. The FSI advertisements fulfill this task in part by depicting the identities and lifestyles of people who would benefit from their promoted products—in other words, the advertisements' intended audiences. My analysis reveals some of these identities and lifestyles; yet, the various strategies—including product categories, visuals, language, and more—used to construct these audiences render FSIs different from advertisements and deserving of their own examinations.

My findings from viewing the FSIs through a feminist rhetoric lens begin to illustrate the depth of social understanding that can result from studying FSIs. For example, my analysis indicated that the FSIs lack representations of interracial families, non-cisgender individuals, and non-heterosexual relationships. It also suggested that the FSIs reflect gendered cultural assumptions, such as that women are defined primarily by their roles as caretakers. These observations are significant because they demonstrate that FSIs reinforce existing social hierarchies and stereotypes. Indeed, much as Srinivasan et al. claim that FSIs have a “pure advertising exposure effect” (29), FSIs can also be argued to have a pure social perception effect, regardless of whether viewers clip the coupons. This consequence necessarily raises the importance of additional rhetorical research on FSIs to improve understanding of the various social exclusions and assumptions that they might contain.

Business Implications

In addition to identifying what audience FSIs call to mind through the product categories, visuals, and language found in them, my examination aimed to compare the audience projected by the FSIs to the population where they are distributed. As mentioned before, FSIs are most effective when viewers not only find the promoted product categories relevant but also can imagine themselves into the narratives that FSI advertisements construct. While it is difficult to determine without interviews or surveys whether these criteria apply to specific members of a population, demographic data can support some assumptions. I will consider the most recent data available: 2017 demographic estimates for Harrisonburg, Virginia, the city where I collected my sample (see table 3).

Table 3
2017 Demographic Estimates for Harrisonburg, Virginia

Characteristic	Estimate
Gender	
• Male	• 25,414
• Female	• 27,650
Age	
• Under 5 years old	• 2,729
• 5 to 14 years old	• 4,729
• 15 to 24 years old	• 19,196
• 25 to 34 years old	• 7,623
• 35 to 44 years old	• 5,683
• 45 to 54 years old	• 4,435
• 55 to 64 years old	• 4,061
• 65 to 74 years old	• 2,367
• 75 to 84 years old	• 1,416
• 85 years old and older	• 825
Race	
• White	• 35,728
• Latino	• 9,922
• Black	• 3,718
• Asian	• 2,123
• American Indian and Alaska Native	• 55
• Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	• 24
• Another race	• 832
• Two or more races	• 2,597

Source: United States; Dept. of Commerce; Census Bureau; ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates; *2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates*; US Dept. of Commerce, table DP05.

Although the estimates are approximations from two years ago and do not address characteristics such as parenthood and sexuality, they still offer insights about other angles explored in my analysis. For instance, the estimates suggest that Harrisonburg has a larger female than male population. This ratio on its own would seem compatible with the FSIs' intended audience of mothers. However, the estimates show that the largest age group is between 15 and 24 years old. While the size of this age group might support the FSIs' intended audience by reflecting the large number of families and high incidence of teenage pregnancy in Harrisonburg and the surrounding areas (Nahmias par. 1), it might

also contribute to a disconnect. As a member of this age group, I have already attested to the way that I often disregard most FSI spreads despite my interest in coupons in general. Still, I will discuss a possible shortcoming of this view later.

Like the residents' age breakdown, the city's racial and cultural compositions also appear to create a discrepancy with the FSIs' intended audience. As noted in my examination, the FSIs feature primarily white, non-interracial families. Although most people living in Harrisonburg are white, notable fractions of the population identify as other races. At nearly a fifth of the city's estimated residents, the Latino community is a particularly large minority group. Yet, few FSI spreads recognize this audience through visuals of Latino models or other means. Similar circumstances apply for other large minority groups, such as black and Asian. These observations are important, especially given Harrisonburg's distinction as a major refugee resettlement area. Since 2002, more than 1,900 refugees have moved to the city (Lefrak par. 6). As this number is likely to grow, so too will Harrisonburg's diversity. Thus, to reflect the age and racial diversity of cities like Harrisonburg, manufacturers and retailers might use demographic data to develop their FSI spreads. This approach would alter the FSI spreads' current intended audience by expanding the number and variety of people who can fit into their narratives. Manufacturers and retailers might also conduct their own research to learn more about and appeal to cities' cultural diversity, including Harrisonburg's Mennonite community.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite efforts to analyze my sample accurately and thoroughly, my examination still has limitations that future research should address. As mentioned earlier, this research grew

out of my personal interest in couponing. To reduce potential biases, I used pre-established definitions of product categories and feminist rhetoric when coding and analyzing my data. I also performed these tasks at once and reviewed my work to ensure greater consistency. However, an examination by someone who does not have a background in couponing might yield different findings.

Another limitation concerns my sample. Although a convenience sample might represent only a minor limitation on its own due to its narrow scope, I collected my data in a city on the outskirts of the newspaper's circulation area. In addition, the city is home to and near several colleges and universities, meaning that its population is likely skewed toward a younger demographic. Indeed, because census data counts college and university students at their school addresses, the population estimates used earlier likely do so, as well. Since FSIs can also vary by region, as noted in the discussion of the product categories absent from my sample, other researchers might take one of two approaches to future investigations. On the one hand, they might gather FSIs in the primary circulation area of a newspaper distributed in a city with a more stable population. On the other hand, they might collect FSIs from several newspapers and compare their data across cities.

Finally, my findings are limited to identifying only certain characteristics of the FSIs' intended audience. In addition to viewing the FSI spreads through other theoretical lenses, future examinations might aim to determine the intended audience's political affiliation, socio-economic status, and other details.

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Preservation and Reclamation: Examining Domestic Narratives in FSI Coupons

More than simply offering discounts on consumer packaged goods (CPGs) like cheese and toothpaste, coupons seem to represent a non-traditional female rhetoric. Particularly because women have historically been viewed as responsible for small household purchases, coupons would presumably figure into that picture. Yet, while scholars have examined artifacts such as cookbooks, scrapbooks, and advertisements as examples of female rhetorics (Fleitz; Moeller and Frost; Matwick; Mecklenburg-Faenger; Ramsey), they have neglected coupons. To address this gap in the literature, I will analyze coupons from free-standing inserts (FSIs), the largest source of coupons distributed as booklets in Sunday newspapers. More specifically, I will examine the materiality of FSI coupons and the act of FSI couponing to determine the extent to which they contribute to the preservation and reclamation of domestic narratives.

Building on Another Female Rhetoric

Research on cookbooks as a female rhetoric provides a foundation for my analysis. Because cookbooks tend to be used in homes, Elizabeth Fleitz insists that their existence as a “cultural text” has not been thoroughly explored (par. 1). However, she argues that details such as food stains and handwritten notes can offer insights about the lives of the women who cooked with them. Approaching this idea of narrative construction from another angle, Marie E. Moeller and Erin A. Frost contend that anecdotes and other text accompanying recipes in cookbooks can impose characteristics on users by assuming an understanding of their identities. For example, they explain that a passage from one cookbook beginning with the phrase “Most of us have been there” projects one woman’s

experience onto other women (qtd. 6). Kelsi Matwick observes a similar effect in celebrity cookbooks, asserting that elements such as word choice and images often contribute to conflicting narratives. For instance, she proposes that frequent references to catering to the food preferences of the chef's husband in one recipe support a narrative in which women act to serve others. At the same time, however, photographs of that same chef spending time with family and friends illustrate a way that women also pursue their own fulfillment (Matwick 538-539). Although Matwick does not discuss details like these photographs using the term *reclamation*, her language echoes the ideas of Cheryl Glenn, one of the first scholars to discuss reclaiming feminist rhetorical texts. Much as Glenn "writes [women] into an expanded, inclusive tradition, for this regendered history of rhetoric neither reproduces or reduces the power politics of that concept we refer to as *gender*" (2), Matwick recognizes that "subjects can assume stereotypical gender images and norms, and are still able to change them" (539). These views will inform my analysis insofar as I will examine how coupons do and do not create opportunities for couponers to resist domestic narratives. My choice to draw on literature about cookbooks in this way is necessitated not only by the lack of scholarship on coupons but also by the relationship between cookbooks and coupons. Like cookbooks, coupons call to mind gendered domestic narratives that frequently concentrate on women. To execute the recipes in cookbooks, the women in these narratives must also purchase ingredients, a task that could involve coupons. This second connection becomes more realistic given that women buy between 70 and 80 percent of all CPGs (King par. 7).

Still, while tradition and research support a view of women as households' primary consumers, literature about coupons complicates this image. To be sure,

researchers have found that women do clip and redeem more coupons than men (Dotson and Hyatt par. 15; Park and Gómez 167); however, the margin of difference between the two genders might be smaller than expected. Two studies published thirty years apart report a difference of only four percent between the number of women and men who regularly clip coupons (Winter and DeGeorge 30; “Women Clip Most Coupons” par. 2). Although these findings might appear to indicate that coupons are not gendered, two details are worth noting. Whereas one of these studies involves participants living in cities where FSI coupons are easily accessible, the other does not distinguish between FSI and direct-mail coupons in its results. These limitations in turn might skew the difference in the percentage of women and men who regularly clip coupons.

This potential discrepancy is supported by other researchers who have identified variations in how each gender approaches couponing (Clark et al.; Jayasingh and Eze). Susan K. Harmon and C. Jeanne Hill in particular state that men frequently use coupons loaded to store loyalty cards (176), thus reinforcing Ha Young and Im Hyunjoo’s claim that males might prioritize convenience when couponing (453). In another study, Hill and Harmon note that men clip and redeem more coupons when they are their households’ primary shoppers (par. 1), a situation that has become more common in recent years due to the rise of more non-traditional family structures. Still, as much as these findings attempt to explain the near-equal proportion of female and male couponers, they fail to illuminate the degree to which coupons contribute to the preservation and reclamation of domestic narratives.

Examining the Domestic Narratives

To conduct my analysis, I collected FSIs over a two-month period in the fall of 2018. I gathered 811 coupons in all, drawn from 20 FSIs. The FSIs were published by Proctor & Gamble, RetailMeNot Everyday, and SmartSource, the three most common distributors.

The dotted lines along the edges of coupons provide a starting point for my examination. In addition to helping define the boundaries of the coupons from the accompanying advertisements, these lines form a path for couponers to cut along with scissors. While couponers could tear the coupons out from the FSI pages, the existence of these lines; the image of scissors occasionally nearby; and, most notably, the layout of the coupons discourage this approach. On most coupons, the expiration date and barcode appear just inside the dotted lines (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Common Placement of Expiration Dates and Barcodes. *SmartSource*, 4 Nov. 2018.

This placement is important because coupons cannot be used without these elements. If couponers thus attempt to tear out coupons, they risk invalidating them. Of course, some might contend that couponers could tape the coupons in cases where their expiration dates or barcodes become ripped or detached. This argument is likely true, but this solution still calls to mind the domestic narrative of crafting. Rowan Bailey explains that crafting has traditionally been viewed as a gendered activity, allowing women to use their hands to create items, share experiences, and more (33). In this case, because female couponers must engage their crafting skills to clip and repair coupons, the dotted lines—or the disregard of them—preserve the domestic narrative in which women are crafters. However, the dotted lines also simultaneously enable a reclamation of this domestic narrative by shifting the purpose of crafting from adornment and expression to financial management. Since female couponers must likewise be aware of the elements necessary for validating coupons, it would further seem that the dotted lines support reclamation by tying crafting to an understanding of business, knowledge traditionally thought to belong to men.

To be sure, this reclamation is limited, especially given the other ways that coupons portray the relationship between female couponers and business. To continue the examination of layouts, expiration dates often appear not only just inside the dotted lines but also at the top of coupons. In addition, they are frequently accompanied by text indicating that the coupons are issued by manufacturers. A coupon for Lysol disinfecting wipes provides a representative example (see figure 2). While the capitalization, colors, and other design choices for the manufacturer designation and expiration date can vary,

the Lysol coupon reflects a common combination. That is, the manufacturer designation and expiration date are both capitalized, while the expiration date is also highlighted.



Figure 2. Common Design of Manufacturer Designations and Expiration Dates. *SmartSource*, 30 Sept. 2018.

These design choices certainly serve to call attention to the manufacturer designation and expiration date. Yet, the greater emphasis on the expiration date is notable. Since consumers may typically use only a set number of manufacturer coupons on purchases before they expire, the manufacturer designation and expiration date both call to mind the business side of couponing. However, the expiration date also—and, perhaps, more immediately—calls to mind planning. This idea results not only from the fact that the expiration date establishes a deadline for redeeming the coupon but also from the resemblance of the yellow highlighting to the mark of a manual highlighter. Indeed, the similar color allows one to imagine that the couponer added the highlighting as a reminder rather than found it already printed there. This possibility raises the importance of the expiration date and its implications relative to the manufacturer designation. More specifically, the highlighting seems to indicate that couponers should concentrate more on their plans to use the coupon than on the meaning of a manufacturer designation. This suggestion in turn strengthens the domestic narrative that women are responsible for a variety of planning in the home (Campo-Engelstein 287-288). It also undercuts full reclamation of who should show interest in business concepts.

This successful projection of one domestic narrative coupled with the thwarted reclamation of another emerges again in an examination of the fine print on coupons. The fine print tends to appear in the lower half of coupons. From advertising and rhetorical points of view, this placement makes sense: coupons serve in part to raise consumers' awareness of and interest in products, and the fine print contains some information for retailers. However, the visual contrast between the fine print and the rest of the content is often significant, as illustrated in a coupon for Colgate toothpaste (see figure 3). Whereas the fine print is written in small font much as one would expect, the first two sentences addressed to consumers are bolded. The first sentence is also capitalized. Still, these strategies for emphasizing these sentences pale in comparison to those applied to the savings statement and product image.



Figure 3. Visual Contrast on Coupons. *SmartSource*, 14 Oct. 2018.

In addition to occupying higher positions in the coupon's layout, the savings statement and product image are several times larger than the fine print. They also

contain bright colors and are centrally aligned. These observations are notable because the fine print, not the savings statement or product image, primarily governs use of the coupon. That is to say, the savings statement indicates the value of the coupon, and the product image shows examples of items that qualify for the discount. By contrast, the fine print establishes the conditions in which the coupon is valid. Since a few of these conditions are highlighted on most coupons, the fine print enables another slight reclamation of the domestic narrative that excludes women from learning about and understanding business. However, because the fine print features less prominently than the savings statement and product image, it also upholds the narrative that women do not engage with business and similar concerns in a deep, inquisitive sense but—in this case—a shallow, acquisitive one.

A closer analysis of the product images on coupons reinforces this point. Although this examination focuses on coupons, it is worth remembering that they appear with advertisements in FSIs. The advertisements in FSIs often concentrate on images of the promoted products. When FSI advertisements and coupons appear together, then, the product images on the coupons become somewhat redundant. Of course, the act of clipping coupons necessarily separates them from the advertisements, thus eliminating this repetition. However, because this redundancy still exists when the couponer is deciding whether to clip the coupon, the emphasis of the FSI as a whole—not simply the advertisement—seems to be on promoting the product.

This theory gains support not only from the positions, colors, and sizes of the product images as discussed earlier but also from the product images themselves. While some coupons contain small, unclear product images reminiscent of early coupons, many

feature high-resolution ones. Two coupons for STAINMASTER cleaner and Sparkle paper towels illustrate these differences, respectively (see figure 4). If the product images were meant simply to remind couponers to purchase the pictured items when shopping, the product image on the STAINMASTER coupon would appear to suffice. Yet, because more coupons are including higher quality product images, the product images seem to function more like advertisements. Particularly because the product images present items in colorful, eye-catching ways without highlighting the items' specific benefits or features, they perpetuate the domestic narrative that women are not inquisitive but, again, only acquisitive.



Figure 4. Images on Coupons. *RetailMeNot Everyday*, 4 Nov. 2018.

Revisiting Coupons as a Non-Traditional Female Rhetoric

In this examination, I have identified several ways that the materiality of FSI coupons and the act of FSI couponing enable the preservation and reclamation of domestic narratives. To summarize, I argued that coupons and couponing uphold domestic narratives wherein women are homemakers, crafters, and planners. I also contended that they perpetuate the domestic narrative in which women are more acquisitive than inquisitive. Finally, I suggested that coupons and couponing support reclamations of the value of crafting and, to a lesser extent, the accessibility of understanding and engaging in business. However, these findings raise questions about their collective effect on coupons as a non-traditional female rhetoric.

As my analysis indicates, coupons are primarily composed of elements that advance advertising and marketing aims. At first glance, these components would appear to undermine the value of coupons as a non-traditional female rhetoric. That is, they seemingly reduce coupons to a form of currency traded for products that couponers actually desire. While this impression might be true to some extent, it neglects another possibility stemming from the act of couponing.

Like cookbooks, the act of couponing is often passed down. Yet, the value of coupons as a non-traditional female rhetoric extends beyond transferring this tradition from one generation to another. As couponers earmark certain FSI pages and disregard others, they render coupons a means of expressing choice. When couponers decide whether to cut or tear out coupons from FSI pages, they turn couponing into a craft or challenge. Thereafter, couponers transform coupons into collectibles, tucking them inside their wallets, pockets, and purses for later use. Finally, couponers forge coupons into

links that connect them to family, friends, and other couponers whenever they share and exchange the coupons. Although coupons and the elements that constitute them might not encourage these practices, couponers' engagement in them nevertheless might represent an important way that they reclaim domestic narratives for themselves.

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Conclusion

In addition to marking the end of my study for a master's degree from the School of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication, this thesis represents a few beginnings. For me personally, it provides an entrance into exploring the complexities of coupons that initially inspired my research. As mentioned in my introduction, I viewed changes in my relationship with coupons over the years as consequences of several external events in my life. However, with the findings from my two articles, I now wonder about the influence that coupons themselves might have had on this relationship. Given my first article's conclusion that FSIs project the idea that their intended audience is mothers, it would seem natural for my grandmother to gravitate toward them. Indeed, as a mother to my mother, my grandmother might have seen herself in the FSI advertisements. This impression certainly would have been strengthened by the fact that my grandmother was also traditional, conforming to many gendered cultural assumptions about womanhood and parenthood.

Yet, the connection between my grandmother's interactions with FSIs and me becomes clear only through insights from my second article. For coupons to exist as a non-traditional female rhetoric with ties to domestic narratives, the act of couponing must be handed down. By inviting me to clip coupons with her, then, my grandmother might be said to have passed this practice—and the domestic narratives related to it—onto me. This suggestion is important because it has caused me to see my interactions with coupons differently. Rather than only redeem coupons to maximize my savings on purchases, I recognize that I engage with them in ways that allow couponers to reclaim certain domestic narratives, as discussed in the conclusion of my second article. This

acknowledgement not only expands my view of coupons beyond discounts but also raises my interest in other ways that coupons might amount to more than they appear to be at first glance.

For me professionally, this thesis also serves as a starting point for broadening my range as a writer and researcher. Although I have studied writing for several years and conducted research in the past, this thesis challenged me to explore feminist rhetoric, domestic narratives, and other concepts that I had little experience examining in original research for the first time. As daunting as this task might have seemed initially, I believe that I accomplished it with some success through revision and persistence. While I still hope to continue developing my understanding of the concepts involved in my research, this thesis has prepared me to approach future projects with more knowledge and confidence.

Finally, for the intersection of FSIs and coupons with rhetoric, this thesis provides a foundation for further research. Building on the discussion section of my first article and the introduction to my second one, FSI advertisements and coupons are rich materials for rhetorical study due to their various components, gendered associations, and other characteristics. What is more, the possibilities for examination will only increase as digital coupons, including mobile app and text message ones, continue to grow. While I might act on some of these opportunities in the future, my hope is that other researchers will join me, contributing to a rhetoric of coupons.

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