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*Crunch my Heart! It Falls for you: Carnal-singularity and Chocolate Gift-giving across*  
Language Contexts

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## Abstract

This chapter augments consumer culture theorizing around subject-object relations with a feminist intervention into how materiality is conceptualized. It introduces the material-semiotic concept of carnal-singularity, drawing on the work about singularity in consumer culture research (Epp and Price 2010; Belk and Coon 1993; Kopytoff 1986) to recover the body as a significant materiality in analyses of object agency in the context of chocolate gift giving. Materiality and chocolate has a long, complex and interesting history, and chocolate is inextricably semiotically linked with carnality. We develop that understanding by exploring the processes by which the body of the woman (gifter or recipient) imbues the chocolate, in order to enhance our understanding of the giving and consumption of chocolate. This process is re-conceptualized as the carnal-singularity of chocolate. By using online data in three languages, French, Finnish and English, we demonstrate how the carnal-singularity of chocolate shifts across language contexts, and how this reflects gendered and sexualized cultural and societal structures.

*Keywords:* chocolate, gift-giving, carnality, singularity, online discourse

## INTRODUCTION

“Go ahead, it’s your favorite...” tempts the main character Vianne (Juliette Binoche) to her lover-to-be Roux (Johnny Depp), who soon sensually licks his fingers after having tasted the magical chocolate praline concocted by Vianne. What Roux doesn’t know is that Vianne perpetuates an ancient Mayan tradition of recognizing a person’s secret desires and translating them into a piece of chocolate of exactly the right flavor, either to seduce, or to make people discover their innermost aspirations. The scene is from Lasse Hallström’s film *Chocolat*, based on Joanne Harris’ eponymous novel, where chocolate becomes the currency for love, envy, passion, fear - and religious censure. Most of all, it is a fairytale that binds together myths and emotions around *Theobroma cacao*, the food of the gods, which represented life and fertility to ancient Aztecs and Mayas, and has been associated with aphrodisiac qualities ever since, thus establishing a powerful association between chocolate and the body.

Is it the slightly phallic shape of the cacao tree pod, growing in mysteriously humid and hot tropical climates, hence combining masculine and feminine features, or the reputation of the derived substances that have forged the myth? Or is it the taste, as bittersweet as love itself, and so easy to combine innumerable flavors and aromas, which is apt to accentuate the sensation and the message? We are now told that chocolate is a seductive product because of the alleged love molecule, phenylethylamine, it contains, which gives chocolate the ability to simulate the euphoria and quickening of the pulse associated with

being in love. Whatever may be the reasons for the legend of chocolate as a love drug, it has been developing since those ancient civilizations in Central America first discovered the virtues of the fruit of the cacao tree. It is a stimulant, relaxant and euphoriant – a perfect combination to become an aphrodisiac, and the element of mystery has been accentuated by its use in rituals, as well as its controversial medicinal effects which were particularly sought after in the 17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Grivetti 2005) and which continue to be investigated. It is a product which is both a food and a drug, without being exactly either of them (Morris and Taren 2005).

Mayas believed that cacao had been donated to mankind by the god Xmucane, as one of the divine beverages from which man was constituted (Grivetti 2005), and in their nuptial rites chocolate was an element for assuring fertility. Aztecs however considered chocolate, in the form of a beverage, so intoxicating and stimulating that it had to be prohibited from women and children. Hence, consumption of chocolate was permitted only for high-ranked males such as noblemen, priests and distinguished warriors. Nevertheless, the pleasure of eating chocolate on each other's skin may not have been unfamiliar to them (Fahim 2010). The Aztec king Montezuma is said to have drunk *xocolatl* from cups of pure gold before entering his harem, believing that the potion enhanced a sovereign's wisdom and power as well as his virility and sexual stamina. A text on Montezuma's court by Bernal Díaz from 1560 is presumably the first in a European language to document chocolate's associations with sexual potency (Grivetti 2005).

The Spanish brought chocolate to Europe and in the seventeenth century, it was rapidly introduced from King Philip's Spain to Western courts, where concubines and mistresses like Madame de Pompadour and Madame du Barry used it to provide access to

royal beds, and for maintaining those hazardous positions. Naturally, the Marquis de Sade, Giacomo Casanova and Mata Hari were aware of its miraculous powers.

*"Into the dessert he slipped chocolate pastilles so good that a number of people devoured them. There were lots of them, and no one failed to eat some, but he had mixed in some Spanish fly. The virtue of the medication is well known. It proved to be so potent that those who ate the pastilles began to burn with unchaste ardor and to carry on as if in the grip of the most amorous frenzy" (Marquis de Sade).*

## CHOCOLATE AS A GIFT

The tradition of offering chocolates to sweethearts may have started in the Royal courts, when Maria Theresa of Spain gave her fiancé Louis XIV of France a beautifully decorated box of chocolates for their engagement. The sensual and emotional characteristics of chocolate were henceforth associated with the ceremonial tradition of gift-giving. Since then, the scenery has shifted toward the opposite gender: nowadays it is most often the man who makes a gift of chocolates to his beloved one as a token of love. Mary Douglas writes in the foreword to "The Gift" by Marcel Mauss (Douglas 2002, XII): *"There are no free gifts; gift cycles engage persons in permanent commitments that articulate the dominant institutions."* This view is developed further by Diane Barthel, who argues that a gift of chocolate implies an act of patronage (1989). Nevertheless, romantic gift-giving is a skillful reciprocal game, and women have used chocolate for romantic and erotic purposes as well as men; indeed they represent the vast majority of chocolate consumption (Belk and Costa 1998).

As chocolate became commercialized for ordinary consumers, it maintained its reputation as a romantic gift *par excellence*; it is not an ordinary food, but an affordable luxury, which is laden with a thick layer of associations (Belk and Costa 1998). It is said to be addictive. This is a fact that hasn't however been proved scientifically, although popular culture is rich with connections made between chocolate and craving, which is a state easily associated with carnality and female desire (Fahim 2010). Chocolate leverages the everyday experience and uplifts one's spirits when consumed alone, and is reputedly efficient against heartache or feeling depressed or down, hence assuming the role of a perfect self-gift which is oftentimes emphasized in romantic movies and chick-lit. First and foremost, chocolate enhances a romantic relationship by its physiological and above all emotional effects. Askegaard and Bengtsson (2005) characterize chocolate as the most important seduction present, rivaled only by flowers in the imagery of romance.

It is noteworthy that chocolate is a gift that is accessible in some form to almost everyone, which has contributed to its democratization in becoming an all-round tool of seduction: it is a versatile product which can be purchased for a very affordable price, or it may represent an extremely costly gift, when crafted into a luxurious selection of exclusively handmade pralines and truffles. Raw ingredients can be of bulk or of meticulously hand-picked, prime-quality beans and fruit, and the same applies to the rest of the brand construction: packaging, promotion, and distribution. The expenditure and effort a suitor has invested in purchasing the gift reveals a lot about his commitment to the relationship: a tiny selection of gold-packaged Leonidas, Godiva pralines, or a mass-produced box from Tesco? According to Diane Barthel (1989, 434), there is a direct relationship between the amount of money spent by a man on chocolate and the "sexually generous response" expected from the woman. Regardless of the expenditure, it is an interesting argument to suggest that a luxury status for food is achieved only when communicated by social relations (Barthel 1989). This

makes gifts of chocolate a particularly intriguing phenomenon. For Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil (1997), this capacity is based on the dual nature of confectionaries like chocolate: their status as an in-between food and a non-food allows for a wide variety of social meanings, especially as a gift. In fact Zarantonello and Luomala (2011) have identified seven categories for contextual chocolate consumption: physiological need, sensorial gratification, memories and nostalgia, escapism, materialism, chocoholism (addictive consumption of chocolate), and interpersonal and selfgifts. These are interconnected in the fetish role of chocolate as a romantic gift: it fulfils sensorial, physiological and material needs, provides occasions for nostalgic emotions, and translates dissimulated or expressed feelings into an action of gift-giving.

Chocoholic consumption may be associated with what is often culturally viewed as an essentially female tendency for physical and gustatory self-pleasure, although it is entwined in a fascinating way to the imagery of sweet-loving women who yearn to surrender to temptation, hence calling for seduction (Barthel 1989). Interestingly enough, the locution *chocolate-boxy* in English tends to be associated with kitschy, mostly female features and characteristics: over-sentimental, over-sweet and luscious (Barthel 1989). Indeed, we may argue that no product reflects the erotic power of food more than chocolate, and no food is so strongly associated with women's carnal desires and weaknesses. Chocolate is coded as a feminine food, with women being constantly tempted to give in to their desires, and men encouraged to buy women the gift of chocolate as an expression of love, with the promise of erotic rewards.



## LOCATING CARNAL-SINGULARITY IN CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY

*“The corner of a mouth (dark chocolate/red fruits),  
 a piece of a nose (dark chocolate/chestnut honey),  
 an eyelid (dark chocolate/fleur de sel, sichuan pepper),  
 a bellybutton (dark chocolate/pimento pepper, red pepper),  
 and a delicious nipple (dark chocolate/the fragrance of flowers).  
 Small pieces of an edible body...”* (www.gastronomista.com 2010)

In this chapter, we seek to draw on existing consumer culture ontologies of gift giving (Sherry 1983) in the context of chocolate consumption. We aim to re-theorize this unique form of gift giving using a material-semiotic approach, which we call *carnal-singularity*, adapting the concept of singularity (Kopytoff 1986; Miller 1987; Belk and Coon 1993; Epp and Price 2009) which has been used to understand the agency of material (predominantly non-human, non-sentient) objects within consumer culture research. Prior theorizing of gift giving *per se*, following largely the work of Mauss (1924, 1950), has theoretically focused on semiotics and meaning, symbolism, social and personal exchange, reciprocity, and social and personal bonds. We suggest that the specificity of chocolate as a gift, as explained above, requires a theory which explicitly deals with not only meaning but also materiality. Sociomateriality is “*the relation and co-creation of subjects and objects*” (Borgerson 2005, 439; see also Bettany 2018), and as agentic and consuming subjects we interact with material objects which are also agentic; this perpetual interaction occurs in a co-creative and transformative manner. This emphasis fits well with our intentions in this chapter.

In terms of gift giving, Belk and Coon's use of the concept of singularity hints at this in their discussion of Arjun Appadurai (1986, 16), who describes singularity *vis-à-vis* material objects: "*It . . . seems worthwhile to distinguish 'singular' from 'homogeneous' commodities in order to discriminate between commodities whose candidacy for the commodity state is precisely a matter of their class characteristics (a perfectly standardized steel bar, indistinguishable in practical terms from any other steel bar) and those whose candidacy is precisely their uniqueness within some class*" (Appadurai 1996, 16 as cited in Belk and Coon 1993, 408). In this vein, singularity means that the material object has a personal meaning, and is imbued with value and symbolism that de-commoditizes it (Epp and Price 2009).

Kopytoff (1986) shifts this concept usage from the material object (inanimate) to the human subject, making the analogy between the slave and the free man, with the free man being singularised, de-commodified or unique, and the slave being commodified or interchangeable. As Belk and Coon (1993, 408) argue, "*whereas gift-giving rituals generally transform the object given into a singularized non-commodity (Kopytoff 1986), in the romantic love model the gift recipient is also singularized*". Picking up from this idea, that within romantic gift giving it is not only the gift but also the recipient that is being singularized, provides us with a starting point for our development of this concept, and our theoretical contribution. In order to do this, we bring in another concept, carnality, adapting the singularity concept to understand how the gift, in this case, chocolate, not only becomes de-commodified due to becoming laden with meaning and symbolism but effectively also becomes imbued with the body of the recipient (and giver), and hence with their sexual agency.

According to the OED, carnal means "of the body or flesh; worldly". Its secondary meaning is 'worldly, sensual, sexual'. Carnal is from the Latin *carnalis*, from *caro*

*carnis* meaning ‘flesh’. Traditionally, women were identified with the body and nature, and men with the mind and culture. (Paglia 1992; Schiebinger 2000). Whilst the binary opposites of man/woman, mind/body, culture/nature, subject/object, and so on, have been challenged by postmodern thought, nevertheless these Cartesian opposites persist and continue to provide a reference for contemporary cultural texts, many of which juxtapose womanhood with the body’s appetites, and the exquisite (natural and instinctive) torture of “narcissistic desire” on the one hand and (cultural and moral) self-control and self-denial on the other. Indeed Cronin et al. (2014) write, in their study of women, food preparation and eating, that the feminine subject is “*a negotiator, or performatist of contrary spaces*” (Cronin et al. 2014, 387).

Braidotti (1994) writes that embodiment of the subject should be understood as “*a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological*” (1994, 4), and in similar vein, McNay (1999) notes that the body “*is the threshold through which the subject’s lived experience of the world is incorporated and realized and, as such, is neither pure object nor pure subject*” (1999, 4). Whilst embodiment and embodied theory strike a chord with many feminist scholars (Probyn 2000), the domain of food is particularly interesting, in that “*the realm of the alimentary brings these considerations down to earth and extends them. ... tracing out the connections between bodies that, in eating, open up and connect in different ways.*” (Probyn 2000, 3). Probyn suggests that eating provides a useful lens to consider issues of identities, and the interactions between sex, gender and power which are always being negotiated. Above all, Probyn seeks to explore the “interminglings” of the cultural, the culinary and the corporeal (2000, 4). This has also been the intention of Martin (2005) who in her interdisciplinary study of food, literature and art, considers, drawing on Curtin’s (1992) work, a “*food-centred philosophy of human being*” as a means of reconciling the self-other dualism and mind-body split in Western culture, in particular by considering the

*“nexus of food, sexuality and language .... in relation to border crossings and cultural negotiations of food-based identity”* (2005, 30).

Joy and Venkatesh (1994) argue that traditionally, consumption was conceptualized and described as a disembodied phenomenon in our discipline. However, alongside this neglect of the body, there was a preoccupation with the spectacularized and colonized female body. This view was challenged by postmodernism, drawing from an increasing commodification and scrutinization of the male body; a development which entwines this growing interest in the body with more general postmodernist views. Accordingly, traditional binary opposites such as mind/body or man/woman have been questioned (Joy and Venkatesh, 1994; Firat and Venkatesh 1995), but the image of women as ‘consummate consumers’, who are ruled by their bodies and thus unable to resist carnal temptations, has continued to persist (Belk 1998; Belk and Costa 1998, Stevens and Maclaran, 2007, 2012). In this powerful trope, the symbolic connotations of sex and food (Stratton 2003), are typically conflated into one powerful, irresistible urge, so that women’s consumption of food is associated with the seductive, the erotic and/or auto-erotic; anticipating the ultimate orgasmic culmination of sensory bliss and complete satisfaction. This erotic narrative is bound up with women’s weak flesh, which makes them particularly susceptible to temptation and sin (Paglia 1992). Women, we argue, continue to be culturally coded as more vulnerable to their bodily appetites than men, being the eternal ‘carnal feminine’ who cannot resist temptation (Grosz 1994; Stevens and Maclaran 2004; 2007).

Dejmanee (2016), in the context of “food porn”, suggests that such carnal embeddedness *vis-à-vis* woman consumers resonates less with marketers’ gendered positioning of women, but more with the “*agency and digital identity play of postfeminist subjects*”. Postfeminism, she suggests, marked an ideological shift emerging in the 1990s “*largely expressed through consumption practices and the neoliberal “focus upon*

*individualism, choice and empowerment*” (Gill 2007, 149), where women increasingly used digital tools to negotiate contradictory postfeminist politics, rendering them both exploited *and* resistant. It should also be noted in this context that the female body and its pleasures were foregrounded in the postfeminist (or third wave feminist) phase, framed within a discourse of liberatory play and empowerment, and that the problematics of women’s identification with the body are now revisited in the current fourth wave of feminism.

The concept of carnal-singularity allows us to map the shifting relation to gender/ed and sexualised structures of empowerment and resistance over time and space, as chocolate shifts in its carnal-singularity, heating up or cooling down together with the body of the female recipient or gifter (Epp and Price 2009). Prior work on singularization has tended to focus on the study of things or non-human objects. We argue that this reifies the subject-object and body-mind dualisms, and as such the rendering of the female and feminine as ‘other’ within marketing and consumer discourse. The concept of carnal-singularity makes explicit the idea that the body is invoked in the analysis as a significant materiality, inextricably linked with the meaning processes of singularization. It is here we make a feminist intervention into the theory. Following this, by tracing the carnal-singularization of chocolate consumption *vis-à-vis* gift giving across language contexts, we demonstrate a further critical intervention, extrapolating the notion that by tracing these differences we challenge the naturalisation and normalisation of womens’ subordination to the body (and bodily impulses) as an uncontested, universal taken-for-granted.

## **METHOD AND DATA**

The primary researcher collected online data in the English, French and Finnish language, through a multi-sited netnography (Kozinets 2002), with the aim of seeking a cross section of opinion. Blogs, advertising, commentaries, posts and threads relating to chocolate consumption were retrieved, by using the key words “chocolate” and “gift” in their respective languages, in order to analyze the gendered nature and the underlying assumptions of chocolate discourse. The netnography was conducted by lurking, hence with no participation in the interaction across researched online communities (Kozinets 2002), and it was preceded by a long period of intensive observation of various food-related online communities, aligning partly with the research by Kozinets, Patterson and Ashman (2017) on online food contexts, and the increased desire of consumption stemming from technological affordances. Kozinets, Patterson and Ashman (2017) argue that digital technologies, far from extinguishing our desire to consume, have increased these desires by creating powerful networks that have a “free-flowing productive energy” (2017, 661). These networks of desire are complex and open systems of technologies, consumers and energized passion, where the virtual and the physical mingle (2017). In our study we also hope to capture the energy and desire that flourishes in the context of our research site: online foodie blogs and forums.

The corpus was constituted of four major parts: the most voluminous one originates from prior research on foodie blogs in French and Finnish (Mäkelä 2016). There, data were gathered from two online sources: the most popular foodie community in French, *Marmiton* ([www.marmiton.org](http://www.marmiton.org)), and a similar, albeit smaller, community in Finnish, *Maku* ([www.maku.fi](http://www.maku.fi)). Both are linked to a printed magazine and also include blogs written by the journalists of the publishing company. The foodie blog corpus consists of 128 pages in total and it reflects the consumptive orientation of foodies, seen in the wider context of omnivorous and transnational consumption trends.

In order to complement the first data set, and for the purpose of the present chapter in the context of gift giving, additional data were retrieved in 2017. A search from the discussion section “Coin salon” of the *Marmiton* website, with search words *chocolat* and *cadeau* (gift) provided altogether an astonishing amount of 29 718 feeds (January 2017), with recipes, reflections and comments, written either by journalists or by users. Out of these, a sample of 38 feeds were analyzed in detail.

The third constituent of the corpus is in Finnish. It was formed by streams on a popular Finnish conversation forum, *Suomi24*, and by feeds from a trendy foodie blog, *52 weeks of deliciousness*, created in Finnish, despite the name. The section Food and drink, and its sub-section Delicacies, with the keyword *Suklaa* (Chocolate) were analysed in *Suomi24*. *Suomi24* is a site with a wide array of user profiles, and it is characterized as representing the views of average Finns. Purposefully, the discussion forum data represented a context where no specific user profiles can be identified, and the blog sample a context where the blogger and her followers are consumers interested in food and baking, hence having an emotional relationship with food. Therein, all recipes and comment feeds with chocolate were analyzed. This resulted in 94 feeds, including the blog posting, the recipe and the readers’ comments, altogether totaling 32 pages. The *Suomi24* data consist of 123 feeds on 35 pages, of the 2723 pages under the section Chocolate. Both sets of data were retrieved in February 2017.

Corporate-generated online discourse on chocolate in English constitutes the fourth section of the multi-sited netnography. It was retrieved for the purpose of having a wider array of genres in the corpus, and for incorporating English data to enhance the comparative aspect. These excerpts were retrieved in 2016-2017 from commercial websites related to chocolate consumption and gift-giving. Due to the nature of this data and the structure of the sites, the volume of pages was not measured.

The primary researcher analyzed all texts in their original language by manual coding, which resulted in three themes, Romance of St. Valentine's Day, An Emotionally Charged Gift and Self-Gift, and Baking with Chocolate. These are highlighted in the section on findings, with interlinguistic comparison. Notwithstanding the volume and width of the data, inconsistencies remain, hence the analysis presented below is indicative, and requires thorough further investigation.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Romance of St. Valentine's Day**

The gender-reinforcing capacity of St. Valentine's Day and its rituals associated with chocolate, have been emphasized in prior research by Minowa, Khomenko and Belk (2011) and by Close (2012). An overview of websites that specialized in chocolate gifts shows a tendency that in the French-speaking world it is more common to offer chocolate to men and women, whereas sites in English are more focused on confectionary gifts designed primarily for women. Despite corporate attempts to commercialize chocolate as a gift to both women and men, the market for St. Valentine's Day targets essentially female recipients. It is abundant, which reveals the importance of chocolate as the ultimate romantic gift. The website Hotel Chocolat ([www.hotelchocolat.com](http://www.hotelchocolat.com)) displays a collection of chocolate gifts for St. Valentine's Day, with an interesting array of themes that go from a discreet "Straight from the heart" to strictly "Naughty", both embodying the central theme of offering chocolate in exchange of something else:



*“If Valentine's Day was a black and white movie, this is what our big love would be holding when they turned up on our doorstep at the end: the classic huge, heart-shaped box of chocolates with a ribbon. Sweep them off their feet the old-fashioned way this February 14th with 35 breathtaking caramels, cocktails, fruities, pralines and more.”*

*“One thing on your mind this Valentine's Day? Make sure your other half is on the same page with these five solid 40% milk chocolate hearts. Irresistibly mellow, they're perfect for leaving on pillows, sneaking into pockets or slipping across dinner tables...”*  
 (<http://www.hotelchocolat.com/uk/shop/valentines-day-gifts/straight-from-the-heart-valentine-chocolates/21.12.2016>)

An interesting feature is that the romantic version costs £39.00 and the naughty one only £2.50. When the case is almost closed, why spend more? Indeed, an overarching meta-discourse in the English data on chocolate gifts is that of playfulness and humour, combined with layers of seduction and eroticism. Another famous chocolate manufacturer, Neuhaus, has chosen straightforward but elegant denominations for its chocolate gift selections. Even on the English version of the site, names are in French, the language of romance, and even more: Caprice, Plaisir, Désir, Tentation, Irrésistibles or Séduction ([www.neuhaus.fi](http://www.neuhaus.fi)).

Naturally, gift-giving on Valentine's Day is a tradition consolidating established relationships and does not restrict itself to seducing a new partner. In both contexts, the gift of chocolate is seen to be a prerequisite and an essential first step towards sexual conquest, melting away a woman's sexual resistance (Barthel 1989). Obviously, chocolate is also a product that women buy for themselves, a small treat that provides pleasure and perhaps engenders 'jouissance' (joyful loving of oneself, even orgasm as in its signification in French), its auto-erotic and sensual power arguably making it the perfect monadic gift. Consuming chocolate, like love, is to be swept away by longing; both bring about euphoria,

relaxation and ecstasy, and both bring about strong emotional and physiological responses. The pleasure may be transitory, but intense while it lasts, with phrases such as ‘melting moments’ conjuring up the highly sensual and embodied aspects of letting go and giving in to desire (Lupton 1996).

### **An emotionally charged gift and self-gift**

*“He showed the words “chocolate cake” to a group of Americans and recorded their word associations. “Guilt” was the top response. If that strikes you as unexceptional, consider the response of French eaters to the same prompt: “celebration.”*

— Michael Pollan, *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (2008).

Chocolate seems to hold an especial role in engendering positive feelings due to its link with indulgence, comfort and pleasure, as well as negative emotions, weight gain and the loss of self-control (Lupton 1996). In their study of women’s chocolate consumption, Belk (1998) and Belk and Costa (1998, 189) refer to the ‘emotionally charged’ environment within which women consume chocolate, with ambivalence an integral part of women’s consumption of such products. Bloggers express this clearly: *“Good thing about it is I can have it on my SW diet, while only being a little bit naughty. And being on a diet and a chocolate lover is a real killer!!!!”* (Nicola, chocablog.com). Belk, Ger and Askegaard (1996) also address this tension, when they write that *‘the state of wanting itself is simultaneously exciting, pleasurable, and frustrating: an exquisite torture.’* (1996, 370).

The theme of seduction is a key feature in the emotional process when a product associated with innocent indulgence and romance may become decadent and sinful. Here, we suggest a reading of this process by the notion of carnal objectification by and through food. This development of food and sex drives via chocolate remains a matter of interpretation and is highly dependent on the context of gift-giving, of the extant relationships, and the expectations of those involved. Nevertheless, the associational web of sweetness, sensuality and sin is age-old and robust, and it can be reinforced by the physical substance of chocolate which makes it so versatile in cooking and baking.

The Finnish online discourse on chocolate reveal considerable differences between the English and French data. On Finnish conversation forums, the emotional index connected to chocolate is primarily that of an everyday pleasure, which is nevertheless somewhat stigmatized as easily leading to overeating and excessive self-indulgence, especially when one is in a blue mood. Chocolate is discussed for its nutritional faculties; taste differences are argued with vehemence, and ethical aspects of chocolate production, for example, child labor, are found in the discussion threads. However, emotionality is seldom found in Finnish chocolate discourse in the same way as in the overtly eroticized French discourse, or in the playful English chocolate talk. There are some allusions made to eating chocolate with sweethearts, but interestingly enough, these may be dealt with in a straightforward, practically oriented style: “*J. Tule käymään ja tuo suklaata mukanas...tekee niin paljon mieli!*” [J. Come over and bring chocolate with you. I am craving it so much!]. This discourse is far from chocolate-boxy poetics; quite the contrary. It is about need.

However, it is noteworthy that an objectification of men — to an extent of illustrating carnal-singularity similar to that of women — is found in several feeds in Finnish, especially in the highly racialised context of associating white and dark chocolate with the

skin colour of men: *"Tykkään tummasta suklaasta enemmän kuin vaaleasta : ) Mutta kaipaan vaaleaa miestä."* [I prefer dark chocolate to white :) But I miss a white man.] Both men and women express themselves with this metaphor, which fits adequately the context of Finnish gender equality and imbues the male body with the chocolate gift. In this instance we see the conflation of the body and chocolate, between eating and sex, but here, it is the male body that is objectified as something delicious to consume. This example reinforces a cultural norm that women are driven by their carnal desires. Nevertheless, men tend to use this locution with a depreciative and somewhat jealous tone. Given the relatively late internationalization of Finnish society, skin colour and the presumed high potency of non-white men are still an issue in colloquial and popular discourse. Examples of the metaphoric use of chocolate associated with female skin colour were not found in this sample.

In blogs of Finnish foodies, chocolate occurred as an ingredient like any other, and it was not mystified nor ascribed any specific role. A number of allusions were made, however, to sin: not as in the sin of the flesh in an erotic sense, but in the sense of a highly calorific commodity, which is dangerous for one's figure. *"Syntisen hyvä"* [Sinfully good] was the epithet to chocolate creations in several blog feeds. Comments by readers accentuated this discourse: *"Oi oi. Kun puolen vuoden herkkulakko on tammikuussa ohitse, tiedän mitä sitten leivon!"* [Oh, when my six month sweets strike is over in January, I know what I'm going to bake!] The more indulgent the cake, the more comments there were, with indexes of prohibition (I shouldn't), desire (I just have to start baking immediately) and pure delight (It's just so goood). Pleasures of baking and especially of sharing the creations are present in the Finnish foodie talk, which appears almost denuded of sensual connotations, establishing a difference with the average Finns talking about chocolate on the discussion forum. The narrative of striving towards healthy eating is pre-eminent, although one can give in to sweet temptations every now and then.

### **Baking with chocolate: a pleasure for the gifter and the recipient**

If chocolate in the form of confectionary products is most often offered by men to women (when in a heterosexual context of relationship building), baking with chocolate is a traditionally female way of conquering a heart and making a gift. Locher et al. (2005) claim that when women offer self-made gifts such as chocolate cookies or cakes, these are often associated by men with the comfort foods of their childhood. A clever woman plays the card of warm memories of a mother baking chocolate chip cookies, which is a safe and subtle way to start the seduction process. Making a mouth-watering, rich and voluptuous chocolate cake might be the next step, and it reinforces the old adage that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach! Indeed, in our interpretation of carnal singularity, anticipation of sex may constitute a continuum - from more de-carnal-singularized gifts such as chocolate cookies towards highly carnal-singularized products such as a luscious, promise-laden chocolate cake. The carnally evocative power of chocolate gifts shifts according to the relationship and the expectations of counterparts.

Most examples on carnal-singularity in the context of baking with chocolate were found in the French data. An analysis of the *Marmiton* discussion forum sheds light on the carnal associations cherished by French consumers: out of the 38 feeds analyzed, eighteen contained an index of indulgence, self-pleasure or seduction: expressions, locutions or other types of discursive tools such as ellipses, which were used to enhance the association between chocolate and sensuality, to accentuate the sense of mystery or prohibition, and to emphasize the uniqueness of chocolate as an ingredient. Not only this, but the characterization of

chocolate as a gift demonstrates that the chocolate gift becomes imbued with the body of the woman in the act of gift giving:

*”Croque mon coeur, il craque pour toi ! Réalisez pas à pas un coeur en chocolat, marqué de votre plus beau message d'amour.” [Crunch my heart, it falls for you! Step by step, make a heart in chocolate, marked with your most beautiful message of love.]*

*”S’il y a bien une chose à laquelle on ne résiste jamais, c’est le chocolat. Allez, ne prenez pas cet air innocent ! Qui n’a jamais ressenti une grande émotion en laissant fondre un carré de chocolat sous le palais, en respirant la bonne odeur du gâteau en train de cuire, en trempant son doigt dans la pâte encore crue ?” [If there is one thing one never resists, it’s chocolate. Come on, don’t take that innocent look! Who has never felt a grand emotion while having a piece of chocolate melting in the palate, while sniffing the lovely scent of a cake baking, while dipping one’s finger in the dough, still uncooked?]*

*”(Attention, vous avez un peu de chocolat au coin des lèvres). Et, à notre grande surprise, l’opération est simplissime, divinement régressive...” [ (Attention, you have a bit of chocolate on your lips.) And, to our big surprise, the operation is most simple, divinely regressive...]*

Allusions to touching and the physical effects of chocolate are abundant in French baking scenes: licking, salivating, dipping fingers. This creates discursively a context which is as pleasurable for the baker as the result will be for the receiver of the chocolatey gift. The metaphor of succumbing is found in five feeds, where the image of melting

chocolate can be interpreted as giving in to temptation. Interestingly, in our corpus the more intimate context of a discussion forum provides more liberty to writers than the blog format.

French culinary discourse is prone to sensuality, which fits the stereotype of French culture with a constantly ongoing, subtle or overtly seductive play. The treasured culinary heritage is deeply embedded in national culture and heralded as one of the icons of Frenchness. When chocolate comes into the picture, the language becomes even more laden with allusions to seduction, temptation, giving up or resisting (but why should we? as one thread of the meta-discourse of bakers seems to ask). Chocolate truly is an iconic element for French bakers who wish to provide pleasure for themselves or for others, and the carnal connotations become more frequent within a context of the free, associative genre of online writing such as a conversation forum.

This discursive strategy weaves beautifully together the levels of tempting, hence constructing a setting for seduction: one is enchanted by the sweetness of the culinary result (sometimes also by the baking process, as it is so hard to resist tasting) and by the person to whom it is given. It is not surprising that one of the most beloved chocolate desserts in France is called *fondant au chocolat*, literally “chocolate melting”. To be able to enjoy the voluptuous, almost liquid chocolate within, one needs to break the crust hiding it and let the sensual dark chocolate flow onto the plate. Tempting, and irrevocable – a deep metaphor of a seductive play.

In the Finnish data, we found an eloquent example of carnal-singularity by chocolate, which provoked interesting indignation and cyber-rage, as it disrupted the dominant discourse by associating baking with eroticism. A Finnish bake-off/beauty contestant/Instagram celebrity provoked a small storm online in January 2017 with her video feeds and Instagram photos, presenting scenes of baking tempting chocolate cakes and

brownies flagged with “Eat me!” signs. Her looks and self-styling owe a great deal to Nigella Lawson, who is widely regarded as the celebrity cook who brought ‘gastroporn’ into mainstream cookery TV programmes (Hewer and Brownlie 2009; Stevens, Cappellini, and Smith 2015). Perhaps in a less sophisticated way than Nigella, she dressed in red satin and revealed her overgenerous décolleté ([www.iltasanomat.fi](http://www.iltasanomat.fi)).

Contrasting to French culinary discourse, baking in Finland has traditionally had scant carnal or erotic connotations, and Finnish women expressed outrage for this provocative intrusion into their domestic, nurturing domain: *“No need to go crying in yellow press after these kind of pics...”*. The exasperation may result from the fact that this self-made, male-appealing media personality attempts to eroticize something which traditionally isn’t erotic in Finland (resentment for the loss of innocence around eating chocolate cake) or, more intriguingly, in the Finnish context, since she wants to make public some of the ancient feminine tricks of baking (jealousy for complicity?). Empowering comments from both men (*“Who’s the lucky guy??”*) and women (*“Don’t worry, go on!”*) kept on coming, however, after the incident was made public in the national press, demonstrating a polarization of views around sexualizing chocolate.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have used cross-linguistic data to illustrate how chocolate as a gift shifts across national boundaries in the way the body of a woman (and, sometimes, of a man) is linked to the consuming and loving of chocolate. We have introduced the concept of carnal-singularity to progress the ideas around materiality in consumer culture, in particular *“the relation and co-creation of subjects and objects”* (Borgerson 2005, 439), and issues of



agency, suggesting a way that might be used to map the shifting values and meanings of chocolate *vis-à-vis* women's bodies in popular discourse. In doing so we have sought to demonstrate the inherent ambiguities of contemporary womanhood, where the female body is the contested site of liberation and is imbued with all the postmodern "paradoxical juxtapositions" that inhere in the concept and construction of ideal femininities (Cronin et al. 2014, 387). In these foodie internet sites, the woman is at once free to express her sexuality and at the same time, checked for "unfeminine" excesses of sexuality or (food) consumption – two aspects inextricably linked in the discourse, and recalling Probyn's (2000) work on the relationship between the culinary, the corporeal and the cultural.

When compared, English, Finnish and French chocolate discourses seem to fulfil diversified functions for consumers. Where Finns adopt mostly a practical orientation with, for example, ethical, nutritious or caregiving concerns in the context of home life and women's responsibility to nurture others, the French tend to use chocolate more as a narrative for seduction, and the English express guilty pleasures, kitsch and humour, reflecting the paradoxes highlighted by Cronin et al. (2014) in their study. Moreover, they are tempted by these attributes across commercial online discourse in English. There is a layer of mystery and invitation for chocolate in French, which manifests itself in Finnish as a prohibitive element, due to nutritional and calorific concerns.

Online discourse on chocolate gifts and self-gifts in all these languages construe a culturally embraced narrative where women may adopt various roles, shifting from carnal-singularized active gifters towards passive objects, expecting gifts, whereas the roles assigned for men tend to be narrowed down as gift-givers. Across the different language contexts, the carnal-singularity of the chocolate gift shifts, from the almost desexualized, humorous and

kitsch, with guilty pleasure of the self-gift in English, to the overtly sexualized, seduction in French, and the more serious, evaluative, and critical discourse in Finnish.

The concept of carnal-singularity thus demonstrates how conceptualizations of consumption, women, the body and sexuality, are culturally specific and nuanced, indicating a challenge to the carnal feminine in popular and academic Western discourse. Furthermore, they show, in their varied representations of women's relationship with food in online foodie blogs, how complex, open and passionate these "networks of desire" can be, and the importance of food as a means of collapsing the self-other, subject-object, and material-virtual in the context of cultural negotiations about food and what it signifies between people. In relation to the gift and the recipient, when object and subject melt away in a mouthwatering moment of reciprocal exchange, one can begin to understand what Deleuze means when he writes that food is "*the mediator between discourse and the body*", or doubt Curtin's (1992) observation (in Martin 2005, 28) that food is "*one of the most common and pervasive sources of value in human experience*", particularly, we would add, when it is offered to others as a gift.

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